Trenches

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Trenches

by EclipseWing

Summary

"Maybe you should kill them," Harry says. He's sitting perched on the stairs, hands clasped together, green eyes watching Tom and his irritating year mates. His form is hazy around the edges, an almost translucent quality to his image.
"I can't just kill people," Tom says.
"Not in public."

Role-Reversal where Harry is the Dark Lord and Tom Riddle is the Boy-Who-Survived.

Notes

This was not what I intended to write.

phantom

Tom first sees *him* a week or two into his first year at Hogwarts.

Tom had been lurking in the fringes of the Slytherin first years, keeping his head down and ears sharp. He has quickly learned that as a nobody orphan he has little more standing than a worm. He has quickly learned that he is too rough and street smart for these pampered pureblooded children. He is too different.

They don't like that.

Welcome to Hogwarts , Albus Dumbledore had said, sitting on his bed in the orphanage with a strained smile that can only have come from a conversation with Mrs Cole. *Welcome to your heritage* , he says, and then he tells Tom why he's in an orphanage in the first place.

His fellow Slytherins do not think much of Tom's history of killing a Dark Lord as a baby. Tom doesn't either, if he's being honest, especially considering he didn't even know he had achieved this goal. Especially considering he'd hardly done much defeating - from the sounds of it he hadn't even been born at the time so surely his *mother* had done something… that was if the Dark Lord hadn't done something to accidentally off himself.

Still - the clout from being involved in the fall of a Dark Lord - it's something that he can foresee being useful.

"The Dark Lord attacked your family," Dumbledore says, "Your uncle went mad, your mother, heavily pregnant, died in his attack. You were thought dead too but your mother lived long enough to give birth. But by the time I made it... the Dark Lord was gone, your house destroyed."

Tom's mother had been magical. His mother and her whole family had been part of a legacy. Gaunt.

The name does not hold much. Inbred. Mad. It sounds like his uncle was crazy in the head even before the Dark Lord visited them looking for some priceless artefact.

"How do you know he's gone?" Tom had asked, "How do you know he's not coming back?"

And Dumbledore had offered him a small smile and pulled a wand from his robes, "This," he says, "I believe belongs to you."

It's dark. Long and its handle hooks almost viciously.

"Yew," the Headmaster says, "Yew and phoenix feather. You may, of course, still purchase your own wand. But this is the wand the Dark Lord used. I found it by your mother's body along with... something else he would not be without. Belongings he would not leave behind otherwise. He could only be dead."

The wand is warm. It's like holding your hands near an open fire, but it does not burn.

It feels powerful.

He doesn't buy another wand. He doesn't see the need, not when he can spend his money on books about magic.

The school is vast and it is his. Gaunt means Slytherin and Slytherin means a quarter of this building is his by blood. The other children don't realise this yet - they will, one day. Tom will educate them. He had clawed his way to the top of the pecking order at the orphanage. He will do the same here, sordid history of not, Dumbledore watching him with wary eyes or not.

"That was my wand, you know."

He jumps at the voice. His wand slips a little through sweaty fingers and the sparks of the spell he had been trying splutter. "What?"

He looks up and meets the green-eyed gaze of an older boy. A final year, possibly older. He's wearing black robes, nice, a unique trim, no Hogwarts markings on them. Maybe he's a teacher, Tom thinks.

"Your wand. Used to be mine," the boy says, and then he lunges forwards.

Tom flinches so hard he almost falls out of his chair.

"Merlin," Nott turns to stare at him, "What's wrong with you?"

The older boy draws back laughing. He's staring at Tom and looking thrilled. Hair spiked messily, eyes almost glowing and he doesn't say anything. Doesn't acknowledge Nott, doesn't look twice at anyone but Tom.

And Nott doesn't look at him. Tom's gaze slides over to his year mate and then back to the other man--

He's gone.

*

“Why do you keep looking over your shoulder?”

Avery squints at Tom. Tom who is currently leaning around Nott and Rosier, gaze fixed on where he had just thought--

No. He shakes his head and the shadow he’s been convinced has been following him vanishes between blinks. There’s nobody there. “Nothing,” he says.

Avery leans around him and almost topples off his seat trying to see what Tom has been looking at. Tom keeps his face blank, back straight. There’s a flicker at the corner of his vision again. He refuses to turn.

Something in his gaze must scream danger because Avery doesn’t push. He ducks his head a little, eyeing Tom the way you eye a dog that might bite you. Good, Tom thinks, more than a little viciously. He does so hate having to repeat a lesson and there are only so many times one can kill someone’s pet before it is… well… dead…

“You done the homework from Defence, yet?” Nott asks, oblivious to the atmosphere, “What was it again?”

“They assigned everyone a dark witch or wizard to write a historical account on,” Avery says, “How do you *not* know?”

Someone snorts next to Tom, “ *Dark* wizard. There’s no such thing - dark is just someone the government decided was *undesirable* . Who did they assign you anyway? Someone good, I hope.”

“Grindelwald,” he wrinkles his nose, turning to the voice, “His policies had a basis, his means was…” he stops when he finds himself face to face with green eyes, glasses and that funny scar on the boy’s forehead.

He grins, cheekily, “ *Desperate* ,” the boy finishes for him.

“Grindelwald?” Nott looks alarmed, “Was that your assignment or mine? I could have sworn mine was some no-name witch from the

Elizibethan era which is why I can't remember her *name* --" he's pulling at his hair even as Avery tugs over the textbook and opens to the index and starts reading out names.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Avery says, sounding like he's trying to be reassuring, "As long as you pass they don't carry your grades over. The teachers only stick around for a year."

"The position is cursed, isn't it? That's what my dad says," Nott frowns.

"Oh, that stuck, did it? *Whoops* ," the boy slouches back in his chair. He's grinning obnoxiously.

Neither of them acknowledge the boy.

"What--" Tom stops, because neither Nott nor Avery acknowledge the boy.

"They can't see me," the boy says, with a roll of his eyes. He looks--

He looks *different* , Tom realises. Younger than when Tom had seen him in the classroom. Shorter, hair messy and he's lounging back, neck arched and--

There's a vivid scar on his neck. It looks like--

No.

Except--

He's got a thin line across his neck and rough stitch-like scars that make it look like he's been decapitated. Another scar, red, inflamed almost, in the shape of a lightning bolt on his forehead, just nicking one eyebrow but stopping before the eye. And there are other scars too, now Tom looks for them. Fine silver lines over his jaw and knuckles, like thorn scratches dripped in sterling silver.

He looks like he should be a corpse, Tom thinks.

"What do you mean?" he asks the boy.

The boy just smiles, mysteriously.

"I'm just saying they've never held a Defence professor for over a year - for thirty years - tell me that's not a curse?" Nott leans into his field of view. Tom's gaze flickers between Nott and the boy. The boy who

was older the other day. The boy who could be a first year in age right now, robes plain but Tom could easily imagine a Slytherin shield or--

No, he thinks, meeting those green eyes. There is a pure *satisfaction* at Tom acknowledging he's there, and just a hint of daring. Not Slytherin, he thinks.

Gryffindor.

"Riddle?" Nott frowns at him, "You okay?"

Tom spins away from the boy, ignoring his existence as the rest of the world is doing. The boy laughs.

Tom adamantly grits his teeth and ignores him harder.

*

"Are there ghosts that can make themselves invisible to other ghosts?" Tom asks. He hates having to ask. He hates having to admit that he doesn't know the answer.

Thankfully Horace Slughorn is enamoured by the bright orphaned poor Tom Riddle, "Old ghosts are faint, more transparent," he also enjoys the sound of his own voice, "Sometimes they're barely impressions if they're very old - they begin to lose sense of who they are. They have found ghosts in Egypt that barely remember themselves."

"I'm not a ghost."

Tom's muscles stiffen. He avoids making a fool of himself this time, and adamantly doesn't react to the dark haired boy stalking behind Slughorn. The boy looks at the potions teacher and then at Tom, sighing in disappointment, "Telling on me, are you?"

"Do ghosts ever haunt specific people?"

"Oh, all the time. The Ministry have a department for that sort of stuff though. We had a terrible incident several decades back when a student died and started haunting another student. The department had to step in and set them up at Hogwarts. Ghosts maintain themselves from magic so tend to congregate around magical locations. It's why Hogwarts has such a large ghost population - why it's the largest in Magical Britain."

The boy drops into a sprawl on an empty desk. He's just on the periphery of Tom's vision but he doesn't turn. Slughorn doesn't even look twice at him.

"Thank you, Professor," Tom's smile is saccharine, full of fake niceties. Slughorn practically swells with self-importance.

"Anytime, my boy, anytime! It's such a delight to see a young lad such as yourself with such a healthy interest in magic and our history. Why, when I myself was your age--"

The boy yawns. Loudly. He makes a 'blabbing' motion with one hand. "Slughorn never changes," he says, over the potions teacher chatting about his youth and famous ghosts he knows, "Head so far up his own ass."

Tom hides his snicker in a cough. He does not miss the satisfied smirk the boy has that he's finally elicited a reaction from him.

*

He doesn't ask the boy at first. He refuses to give in that easily. He puts up with his shadow stalking him around for a week, observing his search through the library and keen eye slide over to the Restricted Section.

"You could just ask," the boy says. Still nameless. Still just a wraith nobody else can see. "Come on, little Slytherin, talk to me. It's been years and I'm bored."

"You're dead," Tom states. It's not a question.

"Am I?"

He gets the distinct impression he's being chided. *Wrong answer* he hears and he searches harder. He hates being wrong.

"You're the first person to see me. A decade I've been here, waiting for some youthful mage to drift through who can see me. It would be an obnoxious little Slytherin who thinks he's better than everyone else."

The boy - he's less of a boy now. He looks like a seventh year. A graduate, maybe, hair slightly shorter but just as messy, taller than short eleven-year-old Tom and somehow just as pale and deathless as always. Scars and this almost paper quality to his skin, like it might tear or crack if Tom isn't careful.

Tom sighs, a put upon thing and in the cover of the tall library shelves he turns to the other. “Fine,” he sneers, “What are you then? If you’re not a ghost…” his tone is low to avoid arousing the attention of the strict librarian who stalks the aisles, “Are you alive?”

The not-boy has that same smirk he gets when Tom acknowledges him, and he slides into the seat opposite Tom. It doesn't move, it has already been left askew. His form is faint, like a barely-there impression, "Yes," he says, "I breathe. My heart beats. Well..." he laughs, at a joke only he understands, "As much as it ever did before I got stuck like this."

Tom very carefully screws up a piece of parchment and throws it. The boy's smirk grows wider as it falls straight through him. “Why haunt Hogwarts?” he says, “Why not the Ministry? A foreign embassy…?”

A careless shrug of one shoulder. “I did at first. Got bored. Besides…” he traces a finger along the desk, age of worn wood and history, “Hogwarts was always home.”

Tom does not expect his heart to ache at that, does not expect to understand with a soul-deep vivid memory of seeing the castle awaiting him, candle-lit over the black lake at night and knowing that *this was where he was meant to be* . He swallows down the feelings carefully.

The boy - teenager - young adult - whatever form he chooses to take - watches him, sharp eyes almost glassy in their expression. “Besides,” he says, “It worked, didn’t it? I found *you* .”

“Only took you ten years,” he retorts back, glancing down at the book on the table. About ghosts - useless, he acknowledges, they’ve established the man is alive. And given his scars and cagy answers probably he needs to obtain a Restricted Section pass before he continues this research further, “So what happened to you, anyway? And *why me* ?”

There is silence, and he thinks the other has just gotten bored, distracted with a dust mote or another student, but when his gaze flickers across to the other there is nobody there.

Just the empty chair, set askew as if recently vacated.

*

“I’m on a different plane.”

Tom does not jump at sudden presence next to him. He's observing the snow fall as November closes in. Months and weeks of the boy appearing and disappearing at seemingly random intervals in between launching himself into his studies of magic and this new world and winter has finally set in. The sun has barely risen than it's already lazily dropping back down out of the sky.

"A different… a *what* ? Like a… an aeroplane or…"

The boy - inaccurate, today he's the older version, the one that looks like he should be a graduate at a new job somewhere - leans against the wall, watching Tom watch the view, "There are worlds beyond this one," he says, "Sheets of paper layered over the other. Fae. Shadows. Hells. Elements."

Tom's eyes are bright. Hungry for knowledge. And the man obliges.

"Those planes closest overlap. Bleed. But don't ever really touch." He holds out his hand. Tom is suddenly aware of how close he is standing when the man holds his hand inches from Tom's face. "So close. So impossibly close, yet separated. The ethereal is the closest to the material world, stranded somewhere between the veil and here. I didn't mean to get trapped. Things went… wrong. And now here I am. Trapped. Except--"

And then he presses his fingers to Tom's cheek. And Tom feels it. More solid than the ghosts. Less real than a human. A strange warmth to the touch that isn't there. "Except sometimes you can push through. Leave impressions. People can glimpse through. And I can reach back."

He pulls away, and Tom almost misses the touch. He twists, framed in the window as he looks at the man. He looks at the hazy edge to his form, blurring into the unreal. Thinks about how sometimes he's there, and the next moment he's slipped out of view, separated by a distance unknown.

"Are you stuck?" he asks.

"I was," the man says, and his gaze holds too much emotion as he stares at Tom, "But I think that's about to change, don't you?" his head cocks to the side and Tom has the distinct impression he is like one of those bugs he used to catch in the orphanage.

The ones he used to pin down and pluck the wings off of before squashing.

“ *Why* ?” he asks, chin jutted out, stubbornly. It is said with the same tone he once said ‘ *Prove it’* . “Why should I help you?”

“You’re small and spiteful, little Slytherin,” the man doesn’t even answer his question.

“My name is Tom Riddle,” he says, “Although you probably know that, you’ve been following me around the school for long enough already.”

"Tom," the man repeats, eyeing Tom up, "Tom Riddle," he savours the name. It should make him feel uncomfortable.

Instead he likes the way his name sounds in the man's mouth.

"Half-blood?" he asks.

Tom jerks his head in a nod. “That a problem?” he challenges.

“I’m half-blood,” the man shrugs it off, “Blood is meaningless in the end. Magic will out. And oh, you’ll do. You’ll do perfectly.”

Tom bares his teeth, “What’s in it for me?” he asks, “Having an invisible advisor and spy is surely more useful than *helping you* ,” he sneers, the very idea disgusting to him. What does this man think him - a bleeding heart? “I don’t have to help you.”

The man stills, “Have to?” he asks, “No, but you will. Won’t you, Tom?”

There’s something in the way he says Tom’s name that sounds almost *familiar* --

“Or what?” Tom sneers, “You’re not even real.”

And like a switch being flicked fury flashes across the man's face. His green eyes have a sheen to them, almost silvery, like someone has spilled liquid mercury across the green. And Tom--

Tom can feel the magic in the air. Like an oncoming storm, like emotions made real and physical, he can feel the man's anger take a physical impression. His chest feels heavy and the air feels thin. "Oh," he croons, voice deceptively light, hiding a raging tornado, and he reaches out, fingers curling down Tom’s cheeks and pressing against the racing pulse of Tom’s carotid, "I'm *very* real."

And like snowflakes falling onto his skin, the hint of cold before it

melts, Tom can feel the fingerprints of the man before they fade. Not quite real. But definitely not a hallucination. Definitely not a ghost.

"You won't hurt me," he bluffs, "Nobody else can see you. You hurt me, you're stuck. Forever."

The man draws back, fury still lining every muscle. The sudden lack of him right there leaves Tom reeling and he leans back against the wall, hating the way the air is thin from magical overload, stealing his breath before it has formed.

Green eyes consider him, "You are not that important, baby Slytherin," he snaps, but does not move to lay a hand on Tom. "I will find my way out of this cursed plane of existence and back to physicality without or without the help of an eleven year old boy." His gaze is critical as it sweeps over Tom, almost dismissively, “You’re expendable.”

Tom’s throat is dry. He can still taste the frost in the air and in that moment he does not doubt the man has the power to press through from the world he is trapped in to stab ice daggers through the soft hollow of Tom’s throat. The sheer power leaves him shaking.

He *wants that* .

And the man - damn him - knows this. His eyes are just a bit too sharp, gaze too flinty, “I can help you,” he says, voice still with that steel edge but softer. Like snow falling. “I can teach you. Poor little half-blood, struggling in the house that looks down on you simply because of your family’s ignorance. They mocked me once for it - raised by muggles, ignorant to my heritage. And I showed them how wrong they were.”

Tom’s still shaking. He clenches his hands, jaw tense, “Why can I see you?” he asks, “Why can I see you and none of the others can?”

In the future he will look back and he will hear the hollowness of these words. But right now they are what he wants to hear and the man gives them to him, “Because you’re better than them.”

He sighs. His air mists in the cold air. “If I’m going to help you,” Tom says, and he makes sure his voice doesn’t waver (it doesn’t, he swears it doesn’t but the man’s mercury green eyes look amused anyway), “I’m going to need to know your name.”

He looks away, gaze drifting out of the window. He doesn’t want to look at the man with the flaring magic, with the odd silvery eyes, with

the power to press through the planes of existence and leave the ghost of bruises on Tom's skin. But he senses movement, sees the shadows shift and his gaze flickers sideways.

The man is still there, but he's younger again. That boy with too many scars and Hogwarts robes and probably still a few years ahead of Tom. His eyes still have that silvery sheen. He has that Gryffindor daring grin again, "I've got a few," he says, ignoring Tom to gaze out of the window as he folds himself into curling up next to Tom, invisible and yet still radiating warmth.

He waits a beat, as if to see if Tom will say anything.

When Tom just looks at him, he shrugs one shoulder, "Harry," he says, "My name is Harry."

mirror

The world is muted today. The colours grey-scale and unreal. Harry presses through but his fingertips slide through Hogwarts' cold stone. He can feel its magic simmering at the edge of his consciousness. He clings to it and just breathes.

On days like these not even Tom can see him. The baby Slytherin bustles past with his year mates. The air is warming. Harry thinks it might be spring now. He's not sure.

It's surprisingly hard to keep track of time when you're trapped in a different realm entirely. Even more so when the realm he is trapped in does not exist as a world by itself. Instead it exists in shadows, in the space between things, in the faintest of impressions of where dust motes settle.

At first the time had crawled. The agony of being *so close* and yet so far. He remembers days of following in his friends' footsteps. Of trying anything *anything surely something would work* to get them to notice him. Of trying to stretch his magic out to *give them a sign* --

He remembers screaming. In the middle of the Ministry Atrium, on his knees. He screamed until his voice was hoarse, until tears streamed down his face and still the world just ticked on without him. He was barely there, a form drifting, a few conscious fragments clinging to a shape. Sheer stubbornness keeps him together, keeps him present, clawing blunt fingernails against the stone as the world moves on without him.

He is alone. Occasionally he thinks he sees shadows in the corner of his vision, but when he turns there is nothing there. Occasionally, even more terrifyingly, he sometimes slips too far the other way and he hears the *whispers* . He cannot see the Veil. Not the way you can glimpse the ethereal through a drifting curtain and a rip that hangs visibly framed in the Department of Mysteries. But he fears that if he loses his grip that will be his destination.

He wanders. He drifts. And he anchors.

Hogwarts is bathed in generations of magic. Fresh blood. It is his home and like a safety net he lets it catch him. He sinks his fingers in and it holds him back in turn, even a world away. He settles down, swallows down the *loneliness crushing and the terror* - ***what if he never***

gets out and he waits. He plots. He's got time. He's got *years*. He has no physicality like this, he is not ageing. Eventually a child will appear with the right skillset. Or he will figure out a way.

He is patient. He is stubborn.

Harry can wait.

*

And one day it happens. It's almost unexpected. A delightful surprise.

A gift .

A little Slytherin first year locks eyes with him, brown eyes focussing on Harry for the first time in eleven years and asks, "What?" in that defiant, cockney drawl with the consonants already softening as he tries to fit in, as he tries to blend with his year mates, to make himself fit in, to make himself *normal* .

When he's anything but.

Glee bubbles like blood in his veins. Any annoyance at Dumbledore pilfering his belongings trickles away as he leans forwards, inhaling every reaction like a starved man as the boy shifts away from him.

Hello Tom Riddle , Harry thinks, *it's nice to finally meet you* .

*

"I need you to break into Dumbledore's office."

Tom ignores Harry. He is still perfecting the art, and in several years time he will have it refined. Harry, by this point, will have long given up trying to rile his ire or garner a reaction from him. But this is still early days. The first few months still. Harry is still enjoying the novelty of someone who can see him, making mocking faces behind his yearmates and professors, sniping in with snarky comments at inopportune moments.

I'll help you , Tom says but doesn't quite anticipate that this is not the work of a week or a month.

The kind of magic that can trap someone between the folds of the universe are, unfortunately, beyond the curriculum of Hogwarts first year. And as much as he hates to admit it, probably second or third year too.

This is not the task to be completed easily. This is a task to span *years* .

He feels only slightly irritated by this. Because Harry did promise to teach him. And now he has *years* to do so. And he does. Admittedly half of it is in the form of snide, sarcastic comments (“Defence isn’t important, no, who could we *possibly* need to defend ourselves from, this class has somehow gotten *worse* since I was here.”) (“Has nobody told Binns he’s died yet? Anyway the goblin revolutions are important because someone decided we’d let the goblins - creatures notorious for gorging on the spoils of war - manage our money. Which is why they haven’t updated the curriculum, not just due to Ministry incompetence--”).

Harry does not hold Tom’s hand. He does not tell him which books to look in, he is almost obstructively helpful. Tom’s yearmates slowly settle into their positions in the hierarchy and there is a gap that Tom keeps at his one side. And sometimes when he turns to the gap there are laughing green eyes and a wicked grin.

He turns now to where Harry sits. Harry is not stalking him all the time. Not unusual (“Say what you like about me I don’t have any interest in stalking eleven-year-olds” “I’m *twelve* ”). He looks about fifteen today, hair ruffled and windswept. “Dumbledore stole something from me. Confiscated it. ‘ *It’s for your own good, my boy’* ,” Harry mocks Dumbledore’s voice and intonation nearly perfectly. He gives the impression that it’s something he’s done before, stood up in front of the Gryffindors and told elaborate tales to many before.

And Tom doesn’t doubt people hung off his every word.

“Where is it? I can’t just break into his office!”

“Why not?” Harry fires back, “And yes. He keeps it in a drawer in his desk. I know. I’ve seen him put it there,” he stretches lazily, like a cat. There’s a satisfaction to his movements, “The secrets one learns when you’re invisible to the world. Did you know that Slughorn--”

“I don’t even know where his office is!” Tom hastens to interrupt before he can hear sordid details he doesn’t want to know about his professors, “Or how to get in. What if I get caught?”

Harry leans forwards, full of mischief in his gaze, “Then you blink those wide brown eyes and you stammer about how you were there to ask him questions about your mum. About what happened to you. Why you’re the… what do they call you again? The boy-who-

survived?"

Tom can't stop his lip from curling at the moniker.

"Yeah," Harry agrees, "Stupid, right? But Dumbledore has a soft spot for you, doesn't he? He brought you your letter?"

"What's in it for me?" Tom can pull this off. It doesn't sound too hard. He just wants a reason *why* .

Unintimidated, the other boy just hums, "What do you want, little Slytherin?" and leans back, lanky limbs stretched out over the green sofas of the Slytherin common room. And Tom--

Oh, he realises.

He could kick himself for taking this long to realise. Harry sees his realisation, sees the moment he makes the connection. "That stuff you know about Slughorn," he says, "Can you find it out about other people? Like Black? Like Nott?"

"Why, Tom. All you had to do was ask."

*

Harry has not paid much attention to the students that pass through. And oh - he recognises some here and there. There's the usual set of Slytherin purebloods scattered throughout the year groups. The Carrow twins are the spitting image of their mother, Harry has genuinely lost track of which generation of Nott is around now and Regulus' spawn along with at least two cousins are in Tom's year and above.

Half of the blackmail material he passes to Tom he knew even before Tom asked him for it. The few new sordid facts he gets from a pass by the Owlery for a few weekends in a row, reading letters over shoulders. He thinks he now understands his teacher's frustration with his penmanship as he squints at Flora Carrow's letter to her mother.

But Tom is eleven - twelve now - and it's easy to drop him the information that will advantage him the most in the house of snakes. They are, despite Ron's convictions, just children. They do not play political games behind closed doors. They squabble over school work, they mock each other's parents and money and houses. They huddle around the radio crowing over Quidditch scores and they bury themselves in books to study.

Tom is a known figure. The boy who survived the Dark Lord. Which is endlessly amusing to Harry, because Tom wasn't even born when he got himself trapped. Still. He will allow Dumbledore his lies and the public their hero. Tom isn't used to manipulating fame. He still falls back on old habits. He's a cruel child. His emotional responses are always a tad too slow, too feigned. But he's getting better.

He's the Gaunt heir, descendant of Salazar Slytherin, although he doesn't think Tom's realised that yet. Harry won't be the one to tell him. He can't be here giving the kid *everything* can he. Let him work for it.

Let Tom deal with Dumbledore, he thinks, pacing the corridor where the gargoyle sits, blocking the stairs to the headmaster's office. It springs aside as Harry reaches it. Not in response to Harry, no, in response to the headmaster who is returning to his office.

Harry should warn the kid. He should have warned him when he felt the magic in Hogwarts ripple as the man moved from the Great Hall where he had been enjoying a cup of tea and talking to Professor McGonagal. Instead he didn't. He waits. He watches.

He wants to see what will happen.

He remembers sneaking around the castle at night. He remembers a cold winter night and being draped in the very cloak he has sent Tom to retrieve. He remembers a mirror left abandoned in a classroom that he had slipped into to hide from Filch. He remembers seeing two people smiling at him. Red hair and glasses and he had never seen a picture of his parents before that moment.

("Back again, Harry?" Dumbledore asks, and he's gentle. He's grandfatherly. He's kind. Harry's hatred for the man is an old bitter rot that has festered over the years, and somehow it's made worse by the fact he had genuinely respected the man. And he knows that Albus Dumbledore did half of his actions out of a twisted misguided belief that he was being *kind* -- "Have you worked out what the mirror does?"

"It shows us what we want. What we really want," Harry had parsed out what the mirror did. The trap he had fallen into. His one desire and *oh, Dumbledore didn't do anything, even then* --

"Our heart's deepest desires," the old man agrees, and Harry wonders what he sees. Then Dumbledore is patting him on the back and sending him to bed with a mild chiding, and so now Harry wants to

know what he will do to Tom, sneaking around where he shouldn't.)

(He wonders if this makes him like Dumbledore, watching children jump through hoops and seeing what they will do and he stubbornly quiets that part of him.)

*

Dumbledore is not surprised to see Tom Riddle in his office. Portraits talk, and Hogwarts has ears and eyes everywhere. He's impressed the boy manages to sidle to the one side of his desk, lingering by the chair with the look of an awkward first year student who is unsure whether he should take a seat or just leave.

"Professor!" the boy sounds surprised to see him. His back straightens and his tone is one of perfect politeness. Dumbledore takes slow careful steps towards his seat and doesn't comment on how some of his ornaments and magical instruments are ajar. "I'm sorry, Professor Slughorn told me the password and I was expecting you to be here."

"It is usually polite, Tom," Albus says, as he takes a seat in his chair. His back aches, but it does that a lot nowadays, "To not poke around somebody else's office."

Tom takes a few seconds longer than he should to coax his expression into something close to contrite. As it is he just looks sullen, gaze dropping to the ground, "I'm sorry, Professor. I haven't seen magical items like those before and I was curious."

Albus sighs. He forgets that Tom is still a child. "I have accumulated a lot of stuff during my travels. And people think a man of my age will enjoy more stuff with my age when all I really want is a good pair of socks."

The boy stares at him with something that could be admiration or it could be horror.

"Now," he says, bringing his hands together, "What can I do for you, Mr Riddle?"

He watches the boy. His gaze darts around, either considering a lie or nervous to bring up what he actually wants to talk about. His gaze flickers to the one side and then to Albus. He opens his mouth and then closes it again, making up his mind about something. "I was wondering if… summer's approaching soon. And the orphanage… I don't have anybody there. I was wondering if it was possible to stay at

the castle over the summer holiday?”

*

It’s a good lie. Even Harry, haunting like the wraith he is behind Dumbledore, looks satisfied.

He also catches the headmaster off guard.

"Ah," Dumbledore's face looks a little pinched but maybe Tom's imagining it. "You are not the first to ask that, Tom. But I'm afraid we are not able to take students over the summer." His smile is gentle, almost apologetic. Tom swallows down a lump and turns away, gaze drifting past Harry to the shelf of trinkets again. A silver one is spinning, its tiny arm keeps waving in the direction of where Harry is standing but Dumbledore doesn’t notice.

“Is it something you’d consider?” he asks, “Maybe in the future--”

“It is against school policy. The protective magic of the castle needs to recharge - we don’t house anyone here over the summer. There are no teachers around to supervise, even if we were to make an exception.”

So *where does he go*, Tom wants to scream. Back to the muggles? Back to the jeers and whispers of the other children? To the suspicious gazes of the matron and the whispers of *maybe we should call the priest back except no* ***remember what happened last time*** and Tom’s back stings with the memory. His jaw tenses. His gaze grows blank and fixed on a spot behind Dumbledore’s ear.

"I'm aware,” Dumbledore continues, charmingly, “That you don't have any family, but I'm sure some of your friends - Mr Avery, Mr Nott - they no doubt would love to see you over the summer."

"He's not changed."

Tom glances at Harry and is startled by the fury in Harry's face. He has to school himself to keep his expression neutral. To turn the sharp movement of his head towards Dumbledore to hide it, “Maybe,” he considers, knowing already he will not bring himself low enough to ask. He will hold his head up and return to the orphanage. He is better than them. He knew that already - having magic has just solidified that.

And now he has Harry.

Harry who is glaring *daggers* at Dumbledore. "Help me, I asked him," Harry spits, "And he turns around, smiles that grandfatherly smile of his, and he says, 'my boy, your suffering is for the greater good'."

If looks could kill Dumbledore would be dead many times over. Harry's green eyes flare the shade of a killing curse.

"Do a lot of students ask to stay?" Tom asks, even with his head turned, looking at Harry.

Dumbledore is silent for a long moment, "A few," he says, "Tom," he says, "If there is anything you wish to tell me, you are always welcome to speak to me."

For a moment Tom meets those twinkling blue eyes for half a second, hears Harry's snarl in his ear and then flicks his gaze away.

"He's a legilimens," Harry warns, voice low, "If he meets your gaze he can see surface thoughts. Emotions. Be careful, Tom."

"Thank you," Tom says, both in response to Harry and Dumbledore, "I'll keep that in mind."

Dumbledore inclines his head. A dismissal. And tail between his legs, Tom goes. The door clicks shut behind him and he stumbles down the top few stairs.

"You're a terrible lookout," Tom says, staring with wide eyes at Harry. He looks his age in that moment, not the vengeful angry Gaunt heir, but a startled twelve-year-old.

Harry just hums, "Did you get it?"

And Tom - who has been pilfering belongings from the kids in the orphanage for the past twelve years of his life - pulls out a silvery fabric from where he had stuffed it down his robes. "Of course," he says with a grin.

Harry's laugh echoes in his head, "Sneaky little Slytherin."

He sounds almost fond.

*

Dumbledore watches Tom vanish out of the door, the child sullen and while not actively hostile, was clearly upset by his answer. His jaw had been tense and his gaze fixed on a spot to the one side of the

office.

Dumbledore turns, glancing at the spot in his office Tom had been looking at. An empty corner between two bookshelves. The air has the faint tang of permafrost. But there are no shadows, nothing. Instead he steps over to the bookcase next to the spot, to where several instruments whir and spin. There is one there that glows softly and had pulsed gently when Tom had been in the room. There is another that had once hummed with life but now it just swings slowly. Like a pendulum, still moving. It hasn't stopped. Not once. It hasn't stopped but it has been silent since the day Tom Riddle was born.

Not dead, he thinks, and not for the first time. And yet…

Tom Riddle has gone through his school year unimpeded. He had thought if Harry were still alive he'd appear to at least see the boy who survived whatever arduous ritual had killed his mother and banished the Dark Lord.

And the boy…

The boy is a curious thing. Vicious. He's learning to refine it still behind the handsome features of his father but he has the same bite that Morfin and Marvolo had. He is a child now and children can be cruel. Albus hopes this streak of cruelty is something the boy will grow out of.

He has a healthy dose of self-preservation. That's good. He'll need that if he is to survive when Harry...

He pauses. *When* Harry comes back. *If* he comes back. Ten years and no sign. No whispers. He toys again with the idea of putting out bait - but he's had the cloak for years. He gave Tom Riddle the yew and phoenix wand. And if Harry ever knew he had the Elder Wand, he had never made any sign he was looking for it. He's got nothing. Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger-Weasley are married, and although Ron still has to do check-ins regularly with the aurors, the pair are upstanding citizens with a young daughter and no proof they were ever the top aides to the Reaper.

His other followers have either gone to ground, slipped back into their normal lives or in Azkaban, although there are frighteningly few who were ever arrested.

And of Harry himself there are not even rumours.

inheritance

Lily and James Potter do not live to see their son grow up. (Maybe it is always their fate, to die for their son).

(They have friends and they have enemies and they have friends who are enemies and enemies who are friends. It doesn't matter. The outcome is the same.)

Harry Potter arrives at Hogwarts in hand-me-down baggy clothes hiding bruises and a thirst to prove himself. To find someone who loves him. To find the family he has been deprived of for his whole childhood.

You'd do well in Slytherin, the hat says, but Harry doesn't want greatness, he wants a family, and so the hat gives him to the lions and he *thrives* .

He makes friends who are more loyal than a Hufflepuff and smarter than a Ravenclaw. He plays sports and is liked by those older and younger as he radiates flashes of his mother's brains, his father's brawn. Handsome, charming yet humble and awkward he is a normal schoolboy.

This does not mean his cunning and survival traits vanish. They merely become refined by the Gryffindor red. Ambition leans into reckless obsession. Cunning shifts to brave leadership as he makes friends, as people look up to him and he finds his place in the world. Survival shifts to a desire to do better and to help. Others. Himself. It's all a matter of priority really.

(Nobody starts out intending to turn the world upside down.)

(There are no prophecies or dark lords or murder schemes. Well, there is a dark lord but he's on the continent and his reach does not threaten Harry. He has no interest in a teenage boy, Grindelwald *sees* greater things.)

(Things turn out much the same. Just with less life and death situations. Exams are never cancelled much to everyone's chagrin except Hermione's.)

The holidays suck. They always do. He writes to his friends and escapes the constricting clutch of his aunt and uncle when he can. He

longs for the day he can return home to Hogwarts.

(He relates to Tom here, can understand the boy's burning desire to *belong* and walk the halls his ancestor built. He does not begrudge the little Slytherin his own personal hunt into his ancestry.)

He bites his tongue and tries to keep his flaring temper down. It doesn't always work. Magic lashes out. His records have two incidents of unauthorised magic before he's fourteen. He doesn't regret the exploding cake or his inflated aunt, especially when after the latter he's allowed to stay at Diagon Alley for most of the summer. He breathes in magic and buries himself in the culture that has been denied to him. He's finally starting to find out who he is and who he can be in the world of his parents.

It's not Dumbledore that tells him. (It's never Dumbledore, why would it be, that man doesn't tell anyone anything). Arthur Weasley pulls him aside before his third year and shows Harry a newspaper article with a wanted poster on the front. Harry's seen them around the alley. He's seen it on the muggle news too.

"This is your godfather," he tells Harry, and shatters Harry's perfectly constructed world.

*

To an orphaned teenager who lives with evil relatives, cinderella-style, the discovery of a godfather should be a joyful revelation.

It's somehow not, because when is anything in Harry's life ever easy?

He wishes someone had just come out and said it. He wishes an adult had sat him down and said outright - "Your godfather murdered your parents."

They don't. They walk around him on eggshells. *Your godfather is dangerous* , Arthur Weasley tells him. *He was your father's best friend* , Minerva says, *the four of them were inseparable* .

Didn't you hear? Lily was researching something to do with the veil. With necromancy. She worked in the Department of Mysteries. They wanted her research .

They?

Sirius Black sold out her secrets to Grindelwald. Killed Lily and James to

get them .

Harry hears all this hidden beneath his invisibility cloak behind a Christmas tree in an open pub. The teachers talk about it like it's all common knowledge. It isn't. Not to him. He's furious. He's rage and tears and all Ron and Hermione can do is watch as he screams into the snow covered hillside.

He'll kill Sirius Black, he vows.

(Despite his promise Sirius Black will not be his first murder).

And when he's eventually standing in front of the man his wand shakes. His resolve wavers. Harry is not a killer. Not really. He stares at gaunt features and desperation in the man's gaze and listens to a story about a rat, a dog and a wolf. He listens to a story about betrayal. About years of imprisonment in Grindelwald's cold stone castle and how his godfather finally escaped.

But not for him.

Never for him.

"I heard they were sending Peter here. I thought I'd killed him, in Godric's Hollow. When I found out he was alive I had to find him. I had to finish the job."

There is a brief dream that Sirius will claim his innocence. That the Ministry will pardon him for the list of crimes Pettigrew saddled him with.

It is a dream of fleeting seconds. It is a dream that is crushed so quickly and brutally Harry wonders if he'd even had the thought at all.

*

Spring days lengthen into summer. Tom crafts himself into the model student. Genius. Charming. The respect he gets is less from something that happened to him before he was born and more for the skills he hones in his own right.

He finds the trophy room the morning before the train arrives. There's a Quidditch trophy with H Potter carved into the captain slot and there's a black and white photograph of the Gryffindor team. He sees Harry with his arms slung around a lanky freckled boy and their

teammates hoisting the cup above their heads in triumph.

“Nineteen years ago,” he reads out the date, “How long have you been trapped?”

“Over a decade,” Harry says where he’s lurking in Tom’s shadow, taking advantage of Tom’s presence before the summer.

Tom eyes the photo of Harry. Sixth or seventh year he thinks. The photo version has this odd seriousness about him like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. The lanky freckled boy leans heavily into him, there’s a boy with dark skin whose portrait self occasionally moved to ruffle Harry’s hair. There’s a girl with freckles who sticks out her tongue at the camera man and a girl with a ponytail who is waving a giant fabric lion head. *R Weasley. D Thomas. G Weasley. K Bell. H Potter.*

“Are you stuck in the castle?” he asks, “Or can you leave?”

A pause. “I can leave,” he says, “But it’s tiring. Time passes. Without the magic of Hogwarts it’s more difficult to stay connected to this world and not just… *slip* .”

Tom turns to look at Harry. He looks the age he does in the photo. Sixteen or so and with that stressed edge to his gaze. He guesses he’ll see Harry in September. A part of him wants to ask if Harry will visit.

A part of him doesn’t want Harry to *see the orphanage* .

He deliberates and Harry just watches him. And Tom doesn’t say anything, but Harry appears to recognise what he doesn’t say. “Knockturn alley,” he says, “End of July? I’ll show you some good shops and buys,” his grin is sharp, “I’ve better things to do that stalk you the whole summer.”

Tom nods once, “The thirty-first,” he says, “Don’t lose track of time,” he threatens. Harry had vanished for several months around February and March. Entirely unintentionally, it turned out, the not-ghost’s presence had merely faded for that period. He didn’t look worried or stressed when Tom shouted at him after reappearing. But how *dare* Harry leave him like that?

Harry is *Tom’s* and he won’t let him go. He promised he’d help Tom. Tom intends to make sure he keeps that promise.

“Happy birthday to me,” Harry’s sardonic farewell follows him out of

the trophy room.

*

Knockturn Alley is not dirty. It's not shadowed or particularly ominous. Not really.

The people skulking there? They may have forgotten to bathe in the past few days, but other than that Tom can't see why he'd been warned to avoid it by the barman when he had let Tom through with a cheery "meeting friends?"

"Yes, in Knockturn Alley," he says, wondering if Harry was a friend. Could he consider an older man who haunted him a *friend* ? But then Tom doesn't consider anyone a friend. Nott and Avery are useful acquaintances. He shares a room with them. He listens to their inane babbling. They follow him around and occasionally their tidbits about the wizarding world that Tom does not know are *useful* . But he'd hardly consider them friends.

Harry's not really a friend either. But if he's not a friend he's a *mentor* , and that just makes him think of Dumbledore. False niceties and guiding words and no, that won't do either.

Harry's *his* .

That, he thinks, is accurate.

Harry joins him between one step and then next. One moment the space next to Tom is empty, the next there's a teenager who only looks a year or two older than Tom bouncing next to him. "Why does your age change?" Tom asks, "How old are you, anyway, aren't you like thirty?"

"Twenty-three," Harry says, which is off-putting coming from the mouth of a thirteen-year-old in appearance, "Well…" he starts to count on his fingers, "Depends if you count the years I've been trapped. Which I don't because time--" he tilts his hand, mimicking a slope, " *Slips* ," he clicks his tongue together, using that same term to describe the moments he is neither here nor there. "I'm not physical. I'm not even sure if I still have a body or if it was destroyed when I catapulted myself here. The ethereal plane isn't exactly a physical place to even check."

"Don't have a body-- do you *breathe* ?" Tom asks. Because right now Harry looks full of life. Skin flush, eyes bright and hair wind-ruffled.

His chest is moving - is that instinct then? He tries to remember if any of the Hogwarts ghosts breathe.

Harry laughs, not unkindly, “You should have been a Ravenclaw,” he says, reaching for Tom’s hand. His fingers do not make contact but Tom still feels something. A tug, an ache at his bones. “Come on,” he says, “Bookshop at the end has some out of prints.”

Tom wrinkles his nose, “Old books?”

A beat. “They banned the print of them about forty years ago.”

Forbidden books . That, Tom thinks, is far more interesting.

The bookshop is small. Every available surface is piled with tombs and dust and loose sheafs of parchment. The shop owner is a woman so small she needs a stool *and* a pile of books to see over the counter. She looks up with disinterest as he enters and keeps a wary eye on him as he browses the piles and shelves, Harry pointing out titles of note.

“You’re going to need that book on rituals, the one with the corpse on the front. Energy transference played a role in doing this, may need to unpick some ritual elements.”

“Necromancy? Should you be condoning the use of forbidden magic?” Tom doesn’t hesitate to add it to the pile. Then he adds one with some dark arts spells that he’s heard some older years whisper about. He looks up and Harry’s gaze isn’t judging. Not exactly. But those green eyes do see him in a way that others don’t.

“The Gaunt coppers have enough left in them to cover this?” Harry asks instead, flatly. Tom’s pride won’t let him admit that the Gaunt’s vault doesn’t even have coppers, and that he’s paying for this from the earnings he’s scrounged from doing odd jobs around Diagon Alley for pocket change.

They have five books by the time Harry’s done directing him around the bookshop and two antiquities shops. Tom’s given funny looks by someone he thinks might be a vampire, and someone else sniffs him as they pass by. And while not physical, he can *feel* Harry’s presence. Like a storm in the air, the maybe-vampire tenses, aware of *something* and then scatters.

Someone tries to offer him something that looks like human fingernails and he turns aside, a little disgusted, “So this is where the black market dealers linger,” he says, “What are those - *teeth* ?”

“Prized in potions,” Harry says, as they stop in another antique shop, “Also frowned upon by most of the wizarding community because people get squeamish about body parts although I can guarantee most were probably dug out of a graveyard. Half of St Mungo’s potion supply also required bone and blood, but people don’t like to think about that. Hmm, Borgin’s books are still overpriced,” he peers at the shelf where volumes are enclosed behind glass.

The proprietor of the shop flutters into view like a moth, drawn to a customer. Upon seeing Tom - twelve, unimpressive, dressed in second-hand robes - his attention wanes. “Is there anything I can help you with?” he asks in a tone that suggests he’d rather Tom left his shop already.

“Reviewing your collection,” Tom gestures at the books.

The man hums. He sounds unimpressed. He does not even attempt to try for any sales, seemingly judging Tom before he’d even opened his mouth. He takes a step back to his books.

“Borgin likes money,” Harry says, non-critically, “And you are not money.”

Tom’s lips thin, “Is there anything here?” he asks, eyeing up a desiccated hand and a clock that as he watches, blinks at him. There are a couple of display pieces - pretty pearl earrings and a necklace of emeralds. He pauses by the latter, eyeing it up.

The necklace - there is no better word for it - *calls* to him. There’s a glittering ‘S’ of emeralds studded into a locket. And it’s *whispering* .

No, Tom thinks.

It’s *hissing* .

An ‘S’ he considers. And peering at it he sees it does indeed form a snake. The emeralds are fashioned into scales, and one studs its eye. It’s the source of the hissing - meaningless things - about silver and tarnish and rust. About blood and prey and filth. An ‘S’.

“For Slytherin,” Harry says, carefully, watching him, “That used to belong to your mother, I believe. It got sold - either after her death, or before. There’s nothing left of the Gaunts now.”

Tom had--

Tom had not thought to look. Why bother when they left you in an orphanage?

“Dumbledore said my uncle went mad after… after the Reaper attacked him and my mother. I never asked where he was. If I could visit. I think my grandfather is dead. I never asked about my father but I assume he’s dead.”

The price tag for the locket is not even visible. Too much, that tells him. His anger flares. *How dare* this man sell a piece of his legacy? How *dare* it end up here - amongst odds and ends in a back end pawn brokers?

His fingers twitch. He longs to shatter the case, to snatch it and run. Like a magpie his gaze tracks over the sparkling emeralds.

“Don’t,” Harry says, and his not-present fingers press against Tom’s shoulder. Tom resists moving and for a moment they’re pressed together - wraith and boy. The air chills where Harry breathes next to him, air intermingling from where his magic bleeds between dust motes. “Another day. We’ll come back for it. I’ll help you rip him limb from limb for daring to keep it from you. But not today, little Slytherin.”

Tom’s gaze greedily memorises the image of the locket. Of his legacy.

Of his *birthright* .

And then he lets himself turn away, stalking out of the shop. His fingers long to curl around something, to feel bones snap and flesh tear. The fury sinks in bone deep and he doesn’t notice as he steps straight into someone.

“ *Écartes toi* ,” a woman snaps as Tom collides with her. She pushes him away, shaking off her hands as if she has touched dirt before proceeding to sidestep him smartly and curtly, irritation radiating off her. She’s stunningly beautiful and even Tom does a double-take, gaze flickering over her. She’s stunningly beautiful and absolutely not human.

She looks human, superficially. Palest of blonde hair, eyes the colour of a storm and fair skin. But in the lamplight of Knockturn Alley, in her irritation as she brushes past Tom the air around her shimmers and he sees scales ripple beneath her skin, something that could be feathers or the wings of a dragonfly imprinted down one collar bone--

Tom stumbles, tripping over himself in alarm and almost falling. His fingers claw at the wall to keep him upright and there's a hand that grabs his shoulder, steadying him.

"Are you okay?" the owner of the hand asks, releasing him. The ethereally beautiful woman's companion hovers into view - female, brown eyes - looking concerned. "Are you down here with anyone? Knockturn Alley isn't safe for children." Her tone harbours a bossiness to it that puts Tom at edge. It turns him sullen and he wants to do the exact opposite.

He doesn't. He plays up the charming young man act, "I'm meeting a friend," he says, "Thank you for your concern, he should be along shortly."

The woman straightens, and she appears to take note of who he is for the first time. Her gaze has that spark that many adults get when meeting him. That *recognition* . But hers is different. It's tinged with something far too intelligent.

And next to him Harry jerks at her voice. By the time Tom's feigned looking around, Harry is slouching against the wall at the edge of the shadow. If he recognises the woman he doesn't say anything.

(This is not the first time Tom suspects Harry of lying to him. It will not be the last time either.)

The woman stares at him, before offering him a small smile. "You should be careful down here," she says, rather needlessly.

Tom's tired of unsolicited advice from strangers. He offers his blandest smile and nods and the woman takes a step back, eyes considering him as if he's something new. Something *different.* Then she's spinning to follow after her companion with sharp, clicking footsteps.

"What is she?" Tom asks Harry, staring after the pair.

"Part- *Vila* ," Harry says, "Or veela. Slavic. Fae descended. Some look a bit bird-like - some kind of siren. Her grandmother, I think."

Tom considers this, "Is there a lot of in-breeding in the wizarding world?"

A soft snort, "Tom, did you think some families just spontaneously developed certain skills? Nobody wants to admit it but all the bloodlines have magical beings bled into them. Metamorphmagi had

changelings in their ancestry. Seers had centaurs and satyrs. And the Gaunts, of course, probably had nagas or lamias."

"What does… what gift did that give us?" Those are from the Greek myths, Tom thinks, they were Monsters. Demons. Demons that looks like woman, but with the skin and body of--

" *Snakes* ," Harry says, "Your family can talk to snakes."

*

("I saw him in Knockturn Alley."

He stiffens, one hand on the ladle, the other on the plate. He never quite picked up his mother's knack for household charms.

He waits for clarification, knowing it will come. And it does, her tone curious, mild mannered and yet there's a consideration there.

"Twelve. Defiant. Angry at the world. He reminds me of Harry."

"Do you think--"

"I think he's a twelve-year-old orphan with a tragic backstory. I don't think he's important at all."

He's silent again. On his ankle he can feel the catch in his magic where the monitoring charm sits. Oh how he longs to slip it and see for himself but there are only so many times his brother can erase the records. She's silent longer than him, to the point where he thinks she isn't going to say anything.

Then she does, "There might be something. A link. A tie. A magical scar. Maybe... Maybe we could use it to try and track him down."

Like a piece of string leading out of the maze, he thinks. And then he says, hating himself a little for it but knowing he needs to say it, "He's not much of a threat at twelve."

Her silence lingers long enough to know she's considering it too.)

serpent

The snake is the length of Tom's arm with mottled brown and green markings. There is magic in her form, but the shopkeeper was unable to tell him what implication this would have.

Tom is known as the Gaunt heir already - most people know his history and family better than he does, which means most people are not surprised when he returns to Hogwarts with a pet snake that he can talk to.

"Tom, can you… can you tell her to move--" Nott leans back as the snake curls up next to him basking in the warmth from the fire.

Tom just watches, enjoying the way he squirms, "I think she's quite comfortable there. *Aren't you, darling* ?"

Nott lets out a full on shudder at the sound of the parseltongue. It is not something Tom makes a habit of outside the common room or his acquaintances. But he does so enjoy the panic in their eyes at the snarling hisses falling from his lips.

"Looks like she's got some runespoor in her," Avery comments, "Without all the extra heads off course. She'll grow big. My father had a runespoor shipped over when I was about five and it ate half our deer herd so he had to sell it on."

Tom's fingers skim over the page of the book he's reading. Family trees and lineages sprawl across the pages. He wonders where Harry is and what the wraith does when he's not bothering Tom. Not that it matters, he's got other interests at present.

"Is the Chamber of Secrets real?" he asks, thumbing the phrase where it appears in the paragraph about the Gaunts, about the founding of Ilvermourney and about the monster in the school.

Nott edges to the edge of his seat, "Stories," he says, "I mean - nobody's found it. But there are stories about Gryffindor's sword and apparently a student used it in a duel in the 1700's so…"

"Maybe it's a family secret passed down," Avery says, babbling a little, "Father to son to daughter to--" he stumbles when he realises that Tom's mother is not alive to tell him any family secrets, "Your uncle might know?"

“My uncle,” Tom drawls, “I hear is mad and institutionalised in St Mungos.” He rereads the paragraph about the Gaunts again. He feels like he’s on edge. A fanatical realisation creeping in. He doesn’t voice his thoughts - doesn’t want to appear ignorant but maybe--

The Dark Lord had targeted him for a reason, right? What if this… what if his ancestry had been why? What secrets had his family known?

What secrets could he uncover?

And, he thinks, fingers brushing over smooth, demiguise woven silk, he’s got the perfect means to start searching.

*

There are other ghosts around the school. The baron of the dungeons covered in silvery translucent blood. Ravenclaw’s silent and skittish lady. The jovial Friar. The poltergeist. The Gryffindor nobleman. Their *history* professor.

Those are the ones everyone knows. They’re all commonly seen around

There are others. There’s a little girl who haunts the boathouse. A young lady who lingers in the restricted section. A highwayman gallops around the grounds and corridors on his horse. The hung man can sometimes be found in empty classrooms. There’s a teenage boy in one of the bathrooms on the second floor and all the girls gossip because nobody ever quite knew why the boy was in the *girl’s* bathroom. A group of nuns appear from time to time but it’s unclear if they haunt Hogwarts or the remains of what used to be a church somewhere between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. These ghosts are more reclusive. Sometimes they’re just simply *older* . Their forms are fainter, they’re often only felt by a cold prickling on the back of the neck.

Harry is cold spots and static in the air. He’s an electrical disturbance that’s invisible to every single person in the castle. Except Tom.

Looking into the Slytherin line and their secrets may help Harry, Tom reasons. That’s his excuse, if Harry asks.

(Harry doesn’t ask. Harry appears to *understand* Tom’s desperate seeking of something concrete. Some physical link and knowledge of his ancestry. Evidence he is *better* .)

(Harry's understanding is almost *worse* .)

"I was an orphan too," Harry tells him. Something else they have in common, Tom thinks, this is just divine proof that he can see Harry for a reason. This was foretold. Tom's *special* .

He continues to excel at his classwork. Their stuttering muggle studies-turned defence teacher had quit due to nerves. Their current teacher is golden haired and writes lies for books. He appears attracted to fame the way moths are attracted to light and that, unfortunately, means Tom. He spends a large portion of the year avoiding him.

In the time between he alternates between cultivating his year mates and getting Harry to teach him spells. He pages through the books he bought and sets up a charm to turn the pages for Harry, incorporeal as he is, although a part of his suspects that if Harry wanted to he could *make them* turn.

So Tom studies and Harry plots and they search for a secret chamber that nobody knows about. Tom turns thirteen. Nagini grows a foot in two months. Tom calculates how large she will be in a year's time if she keeps up this growth rate.

(There are no killer snakes. Not yet at least. The Chamber has been unopened for three hundred years. It will wait a little longer.)

*

"What are you doing?" a boy's voice asks from behind Tom.

He's so used to Harry appearing at inopportune moments he doesn't jump.

Following a lead he's found that mentioned something about Corvinus Gaunt and hiding the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in a bathroom resulting in him sneaking around to look further into it is, unfortunately, not an acceptable answer, Tom thinks.

He twists to look over his shoulder at the voice, the lies ready on his tongue. He doesn't need to worry, he thinks, contemplating the boy behind him.

"Is that an invisibility cloak?" the boy continues, "How do *you* own an invisibility cloak when your robes are *clearly* second hand." Pale eyes squint, "What's your family name?"

He sounds rather snobbish.

He looks rather snobbish, Tom eyes up the boy.

He also looks very *dead* .

The boy is a ghost. And not a Harry-wraith-like echo. A real silver streaked ghost. Ghostly and pale and not in the way that Harry vanishes when the light shimmers wrong, this boy has a corporeality to him as he hovers there, arms crossed and glaring at Tom. He's a teenager. Pointy little face that looks a bit like a rat. Slytherin colours, all washed out and faded. Looks like he should be sitting his OWLs or NEWTs.

Tom's instinct is to be rude. But he clenches his jaw and instead greets the ghost with a thin-lipped smile, "I'm Tom," he says, "Tom Riddle."

" *Riddle* ," the boy sniffs, "A *mudblood* ."

"Half-blood," he corrects, "My mother was a Gaunt."

"Draco Malfoy," the boy says. He holds out his hand and then gives up half-way through the movement. Tom tries to remember what he's heard his year mates call him. Mournful Malfoy? Downhearted Draco? Something inane, no doubt. "What are you doing in here?"

"I thought I heard someone crying."

"So you thought you'd *sneak in* ? Into a *girl's bathroom* ?"

Tom forgets social proprieties exist that stand in the way of great discoveries.

"Well you're here," Tom says, almost petulantly, "Do you always haunt the bathroom?"

"I *died here* ," the ghost pouts.

'I'm sorry' sounds fake, but that's what you're meant to say, right? "You must know the castle pretty well," he says instead.

"You'd think," Malfoy drawls. *Drawling Draco* , Tom thinks, maybe that was it. "But no, I wasn't the one with the secret map and cloak sneaking around where I wasn't meant to," he narrows his eyes at Tom, "Where *did* you get that cloak from?"

He's saved from having to explain further by an interruption. "This is

a *girl's bathroom* ," says someone with the tone of bossiness to her voice that sounds almost familiar. He turns to observe the girl. Gryffindor. First year. Red hair and freckles. " *You* shouldn't be in here."

"I thought I heard someone crying," he says, the lie smooth on his tongue.

The little girl looks doubtful. "I'll tell the teacher," she threatens.

Tom's already pacing for the door, irritated. He clearly won't get much further in this bathroom today, he'll have to come back. "You do that," he says as he passes.

He feels her glare on him as he slips back out onto the corridor.

*

"Rose Weasley is staring at you."

"Who?"

Avery doesn't answer immediately, shoving a mouthful of bacon into his mouth. Rosier answers for him. "Little first year Gryffindor. Red head. Freckles. Looks just like her cousins - she's got like five in various years - I lose track, honestly."

Avery chokes down his bacon, "My father said her parents supported the Reaper. Well… her father at least. Her mother's a mu-ggleborn who works in the Ministry and has a spotless record. But her father's tagged."

"Tagged?"

"Tracking and monitoring spells. Regular check-ins. One of my uncles had monitoring charms after he was caught walking off with plans to proposed runic plans on the ministry's new warding. He said they're *nasty things* , basically turn you into a dog on a leash."

Tom glances around, spotting the first year who is death-glaring him and ignoring her. Harry's not visible. Of course he isn't. He's never around when Tom wants him. "There are probably plenty of students whose parents followed the Dark Lord," he says, shortly, "They didn't arrest many, did they?"

"A few. Thomas. Jordan. Some died. Diggory. Creevey. The trials are

all public record. The truth is most they just didn't *catch* or they couldn't pin anything on."

"And your father didn't support him?" Tom tilts his head, curious. His question is directed at Avery but his gaze flickers to Nott and Rosier too.

Avery shakes his head, "Some of his policies… they're nothing purebloods haven't spoken about. Legalise the old practices. Relax the definitions of different spells. But other things… the educational reform alone overhauled everything most of the purebloods believed in. Why do you think it dissolved into a war so quickly?"

"At least," Tom muses, "The Reaper was subtler than Grindelwald's idea of purging and subjugating the muggles."

His words are carefully chosen. He's rewarded when he sees Rosier flinch. He knows Rosier's cousin was once Grindelwald's right hand.

"You'd think," he then says, "That we couldn't find a balance between both of them. Magical superiority. Cultural sanctity. The old ways with a new twist. Re-establish the glory that many families have lost."

He lets the idea sit. It's a work in progress, anyway. But the idea will root. Grow. It's all about *potential* .

*

Things Tom Riddle learns about Harry Potter over the course of their interactions from Tom's first to third years, in no particular order:

He was definitely a Gryffindor.

He knows the castle better than anyone. Even the ghosts. And that knowledge came not from his decade of wandering its walls, but from his time as a student there.

He's an orphan.

He's got a temper. But not a fire-burning quick to anger temper, but a slow insidious rising tide of a flood that threatens to drown him.

He dislikes muggles. But he *hates* Dumbledore. Tom watches his eyes get that silvery sheen to them when the old man walks past once.

("It's because he's the worst kind of cruel," Harry tells him once, the air filled with enough static and magic that he's actually making small

frost crystals in the glass of the window where he lounges during Tom's Defence class, "He's *righteous* . He coats everything in a veneer of kindness and pretends like that makes his choices acceptable.")

Harry lies. He does it thoughtlessly, dropping information at whim and leisure as it suits him. Like now, for instance.

"What do you mean *'you knew it was there'* ?"

"Little Slytherin. I have spent a decade walking these halls. I am not a ghost, despite what you so often think. I do not fall into the same cycles they do. I once counted the total number of steps in the whole castle, did you think I wasn't going to find the carvings of snakes on the taps?"

"And you *didn't tell me* ?!" Anger is too sweet a word to describe what he feels. Fury. Blistering pulsing rage that thuds in his head with each beat of his heart.

"Of course not," Harry says, like it's simple, "I'd never take that discovery away from you."

And just like that his anger leaves him. His vision clears and Harry's there, looking up from the book Tom's left open in front of him. So simple, he thinks. Because he imagines telling everyone he'd found the Chamber of Secrets and knowing that it was a *lie* . That Harry had found it for him.

"Is there anything else you're keeping from me?" he challenges.

"Probably."

It's probably the most truthful Harry has ever been.

*

The basilisk is ancient and huge and beautiful. She wakes from her slumber when he calls, all huge coils wider than he is and vicious yellow eyes he avoids looking at. Snakes do not have eyelids. The brille that covers her brilliant and lethal gaze is glossy and sleek and designed to reflect, designed so that the victim can't do anything but look into death eyes first.

She is centuries old but she is not intelligent. Snakes, Tom is beginning to realise, aren't for the most part. The language reflects that - there are a hundred words for kill and eat - but limited phrases

to describe magic and spells. Nagini is only a few months old but she's already probably smarter than the basilisk, bred with magic in her blood to enhance that.

But the basilisk is *his* legacy. This chamber is *his* .

He'd considered showing it off. Staking his name and making *sure* people remember him as *him* and not simply as a by-product from the dead Dark Lord. But now he's actually found it he finds he doesn't want to. He wants to keep, to covet. This is *his* . The basilisk is also classified with far too many 'x's to be allowed to continue her slumber beneath the school.

Still, he thinks. She listens to his every command. She could have her uses. He eyes up her gleaming emerald scales and wonders how far he could push this.

He should test this.

*

The defence curse strikes again, the staff murmur in sadness when Gilderoy Lockhart goes missing one day. There's an investigation. They find his body in the forest near the acromantula nest. It lies still with no a scratch on him, and an odd stiffness to his limbs, his eyes wide open. The case closes. Dumbledore re-opens the job posting once again.

*

Harry's gaze has a new gravity when he considers Tom after, but he doesn't bring it up. He'd have enough to damn Tom were he a physical present in the world. As it is, Tom's secrets lie as forgotten as Harry himself.

"There's no record of you after Hogwarts," he says.

"And here I thought you were actually reading those books I spent so much time painstakingly picking out for you."

Tom ignores the comment, "You graduated with decent grades. You had offers from the auror department, several other branches of magical law, obliviator squad, magical games even… but you turned them down and vanished. Where did you go, Harry Potter?"

"Nowhere." Harry runs a hand through his hair in a gesture that feels

feigned rather than a habit. Something to do, to give his idle hands something to occupy them as he paces slowly around the corner of the library Tom frequents, “I applied to a few jobs. The Defence post - I used to run a club, I’d been assistant for Remus - he was our Defence teacher, back before the curse. I hoped I could stay at Hogwarts - it had always been my home.”

Tom puts several facts together, “Dumbledore turned you down.”

“It wasn’t--” Harry sighs, “He told me to come back with more experience. Remus wasn’t retiring just yet. And my other choice… well… Dumbledore dropped word at the Department of Mysteries," his voice is almost mechanical, "I had been due a job interview, to follow in my mother's footsteps. They cancelled. Barred me entry. Said I had an unhealthy obsession with her research."

“He disliked you,” Tom observes, and then adds, “I wish he disliked me, he just likes to stare at me with those damn twinkling eyes.”

“He didn’t, at first,” Harry’s lip quirks, “I think I disappointed him. He never looked at me the same way afterwards.”

Tom wonders what Dumbledore would say if he asked him about his former pupil. If Albus Dumbledore still remembers the name ‘Harry Potter’ even now. He can almost see the spiral - pushed away from his chosen avenue of research, diving into it himself, the ritual misfiring, trapping himself--

“Stay under Dumbledore’s radar, Tom,” Harry warns him, “Better to be on his good side than to draw his ire. Make sure there aren’t any more bodies.”

purpose

Summer breaks through the Scottish winter chill and then burns itself up quickly. July and August pass in a miserable damp that never seems to relent. It's hot and *humid* . London, when Tom returns to it, is cloying and like the inside of the womb. Sunsets stain the sky red and he never feels like he's able to breathe, wading through the busy streets and the bustle of the non-magical population.

Harry does not follow him into the summer. He doesn't appear for the first three weeks of term either. Tom wonders what a phantom with no tangible presence on this plane *does* when they're not bothering thirteen-year-olds.

"New teacher?"

He doesn't even apologise for vanishing. He just steps into existence in the middle of class. Tom jerks, his ink goes spilling across the table as the phantom paces past before dropping into a sprawl on the spiral staircase that leads to the Defence office. Rosier curses and dives to save his textbook.

"Sorry," Tom says to Rosier, ignoring Harry, not a little bitter the other had just vanished for the past four months, "Hand slipped." He starts syphoning the ink off the table, saving what he can.

"Hopefully this Professor Merrythought lasts longer than the last one," Harry says, dryly. He looks like a fresh Hogwarts graduate today, "Won't make it the year though." He cranes his head, eyeing up the elderly lady who clearly knows what she's talking about, but also looks like she should have retired several decades ago, "Hopefully this one doesn't die."

He seems so certain. So smug in his knowledge she won't even make the year.

"Pssst," Nott leans forwards from Tom's other side, "Can I borrow a quill?"

"Don't you have your own?" Avery twists, "Hands off, mine cost me ten galleons. They're *collectible* ."

"They're *quills* , when are you ever going to use more than one?"

“They were a *birthday present* --”

Avery likes the sound of his own voice, Tom thinks.

It’s tedious. Playing nice. But Tom knows his role as well as anyone. And he plays it *oh* so well.

“Father has an augury feather quill in his office charmed to only write when a family member uses it. It’s been in the family since the 1500’s and prevents signature forgeries. People would *kill* for the secret of how half the spells are woven onto the feather--”

“I’ll kill you in a second if you keep talking about *quills* --”

“If you both don’t shut up,” Tom’s voice is curt, “Nagini has been a bit peckish of late.”

Nott shuts up immediately. He’s never liked snakes. Avery just looks at him, with eyes wide, because he’s seen how big Nagini is since a growth spurt she had over the summer. “You’re joking,” he says, like he’s not convinced.

“Of course,” Tom’s smile must look as fake as it feels but Avery and Nott relax. Marginally.

"Maybe you *should* kill them," Harry says. He's sitting perched on the stairs, hands clasped together, green eyes watching Tom and his irritating year mates.

"I can't just kill people," Tom says.

"Not in public," the wraith purrs. The insidious thought is too appealing to consider so Tom turns away from Harry.

"Oh don't ignore me. Tom. *To-om* ."

“Funny,” Nott looks freaked out regardless, “Look, do you have a spare quill or not?”

He clenches his jaw to exercise control over who he responds to and tosses a spare quill Nott’s way to shut him up. He then busies himself moving his ink to a spill safe spot and making some lecture notes.

“Tom. I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I was checking in on people. Travelling wore me out.”

People. Tom *fumes* . What other people? Harry can’t talk to anyone

but him!

“Come now, don’t sulk. I’ll make it up to you.”

Nothing Harry can offer would make it worthwhile. He scratches out a note from Merryhought’s lecture. Underlines something to look up later. Gaze skims over Rosier, Avery and Nott to check they’re not still silently bickering about quills.

“I’ll teach you how to duel.”

He stills. He’d been intending to spend the next week ignoring Harry, to remind the phantom that *Tom* is still his only connection to the material plane. Harry *needs* Tom and he can’t *just leave* --

But this offer--

His gaze flickers to the older boy, and it’s not a lot but it’s enough. Harry’s face splits into a wide grin, flashing his teeth, “Some consistent teaching will be good for you. Why be good when you can learn from the best and *be better* .”

Are you? Tom wants to ask. He thinks he conveys the message though, because Harry cocks his head to one side. His eyes have that silvery sheen to them that look like they’ve been painted over with liquid mercury.

“Little Slytherin,” Harry chides, gently, “I know you’ve seen my record. I should have been a shoe-in for a Defence Mastery and an assistantship.”

Tom remembers what Harry had said. And even now as Harry stretches out on the stairs to the Defence office, his fingers curl into claws and his teeth flash in a wicked grin. Like a cat. Lazy and quietly confident in the knowledge that even trapped on the ethereal plane he is the most dangerous thing in the room.

Harry’s smile is not bitter, not even angry. It’s a dark promise stitched between Harry’s teeth and tongue. “Maybe when I get out of here,” he laughs, gesturing around to his surroundings, the space between here and there where Harry lingers. “He’d never consider it twice. But--” his eyes do a funny thing then, that silver sheen almost mirror-slick until Harry’s eyes catch the light at the right angle and for a moment it’s like an animal caught at night, eyes reflecting the light. “It is most entertaining to contemplate the heart attack that would give him.”

*

Harry likes to divide his Hogwarts years into two parts. Before and after.

It's like a stop gate. Before and after the Veil.

Before there was a war. Grindelwald was loose on the continent collecting followers the way one would collect chocolate frog cards. Harry's year had been the smallest a year group had been for decades, all of them having felt the knock-on effect in some form or other from the toll Grindelwald's war was taking.

Before there was a casualness to their studies. Hogwarts had always been in a bubble, protected from the real world. They had *known* , but they hadn't understood.

After Harry's too busy dealing with his own grief, busy hammering it flat and learning how to call it a friend. After he doesn't even realise that he is not alone in his quiet simmering fury, in his teenage righteousness at the *injustice* of it all. Not at least until Neville sits next to him, looking waxen and trembling with the weight of the world.

"I heard about--" Neville clears his throat, "I'm sorry."

There's a look in his eyes. One not of pity, but of acknowledgement and recognition of the emotions reflected in his own bones. "What happened?" Harry asks instead, head tilting to one side as he examines Neville.

The blonde smiles but it's faker than Harry's are nowadays, "They were making arrests. Mum was on one of the teams. But it was messy. Gran was furious, I think she almost strung half the Ministry officials up who came to tell her--"

He's stalling. He's talking about anything *but* what happened. Harry doesn't push. He just waits.

Eventually Neville takes a deep breath and spits it out, like water he's choked down when drowning in the sea of sorrow that rises around them, "She's in St Mungo's. They estimate she was under the Cruciatus for over thirty minutes. Thirty minutes. How long does it take for them to send reinforcements? Thirty minutes--" Neville shudders, "She doesn't recognise me. She doesn't recognise anything. She's breathing but… is it bad that I wish she'd gone the way Dad did? Quickly. Painlessly?"

When Harry starts to respond his throat is dry and the words catch in his mouth. He has to swallow and clear his throat before he can even get a syllable out. “I had him. I felt his hand, I had his wrist in my grip before I was pulled back. Dumbledore says I would have died, that I should have--” he twists his hand. There is still the faintest of black stains beneath his nails that try as he might won’t fade. There are times he wakes up and he thinks the colour is spreading through his veins but when he looks again under the light there’s nothing there. “I could have saved him.” Maybe if he repeats it enough times he can convince himself of that. “Sometimes it seems like we’re doomed to not save anyone we care about. The world won’t let us. But we can save ourselves.”

He looks up to see Neville looking at him. He looks at Harry the way his Quidditch team look at him sometimes, the way the children in the common room look when he chooses to regale them with a story of what chaos he, Ron and Hermione have been up to lately. With respect, a small degree of awe and the way people look to a leader.

It makes him uncomfortable. It makes his skin prickle. But not because it feels bad.

Because he *enjoys it* .

So he asks, “Do you ever think,” he asks his friend, counting the seconds that stretch before he takes the dive over the cliff, “Do you ever think the wizarding world is broken? That it’s just a cage, a world where we’re playing by other people’s rules?”

Confusion. Pondering. A dull acceptance of what is, that Harry is tired of seeing, he’s tired of bowing his head and keeping in line.

“Neville” Harry says, contemplating the idea, stretching it out in his mind and looking at it from all angles before he gives life to it, plants the seed. “You’ll inherit your family’s seat on the Wizengamot now, won’t you?”

“Yes. Why?”

The idea roots.

*

Tom reminds him of the *after* . Tom enters Hogwarts the way he had entered the world, ready to fight from the start.

Tom Riddle, Harry thinks, is fucking *adorable* .

He's like a lion cub who thinks he can roar when all he can do is swipe with ineffective claws.

He'll grow to be something terrifying. Cold snake-like purpose and a callous indifference to everything that isn't him. Self-centred to a fault.

Except he has Harry like both a devil and an angel sitting on his shoulder.

“Rosier,” Tom schools the sycophants he doesn’t even call friends, “What did I say about using the term ‘mudblood’?”

“You’d break every bone in their arm,” Rosier swallows. He looks nervous. He should. Harry watches, knowing he’s visible to Tom, resting in the well of magic that pools in the Slytherin Common Room. Tom ignores him, busy making a point.

“And what did you do?”

“Called the Weasley chit a mudblood.”

“She’s a half-blood by lieu of a pureblood father and muggleborn mother, correct?” Rhetorical question. Evan Rosier knows better than to answer it. “My mother was a pureblood and my father supposedly a muggle. That would make me a mudblood too, by that logic. Are you calling my blood dirty, Evan? Are you implying I’m *impure* ?”

“No, of course not,” Rosier blusters, “I’m sorry, Tom, I never meant to imply that. I’m sorry.”

Tom's smile is saccharine sweet. "Of course you are," he says, "And you're forgiven.” Harry watches as Rosier relaxes utterly. As he lowers his guard and breathes a sigh of relief.

And then Tom sends a clean bone breaker to his arm.

Rosier’s howl of pain has the other boys stiffening. Rosier drops to his knees clutching his arm. Tom's smile doesn't flinch. Not once. What a cruel young thing he is, Harry thinks, what did the world forge him into. You should get that seen to," Tom tuts, sympathetically. “Be grateful it’s not all your bones like I promised.”

Harry has spent enough time in Dumbledore’s office, has listened to enough of Dumbledore’s late night talks with Alastor Moody and other

members of the Order of the Phoenix to know the old man's expectations. His belief that Harry will come back and when he will, he will go for the child that survived the ritual that killed his mother. He went for the Gaunts once. He will go for the Gaunt heir again.

There is, also, an unspoken understanding from Dumbledore that Tom will stand up strong and fight him.

They clearly haven't met Tom Riddle.

Tom is more likely to threaten Harry's position, gathering followers of his own and with a ruthlessness that will make Harry's war look like a peace talk. Tom is headstrong and with a leaning towards violence.

"You know most teenagers draw love hearts around their crushes' name in their diaries," he drapes himself over the back of the armchair Tom has claimed, reading over his shoulder, "They don't sit there making anagrams of their name."

"Tom's an awfully *common* , muggle name," Tom says, voice quietly pitched for only Harry to hear. "There are a lot of Toms."

"So make it mean something," Harry shrugs. There are a lot of Harrys too, but he has never had a problem with it. "Or--" he peers at Tom's diary, "You could go with *Vol De Mort* . Lord Mort?" Harry clicks his tongue, "Reaper-inspired isn't a good look, Little Slytherin."

Tom is a genius. And yet, Harry muses, the boy has not yet vocalised the realisation of who Harry is.

(Willful blindness is a sight to see indeed.)

"Voldemort," Tom corrects, "I Am Lord Voldemort."

"Flight from death," Harry drawls, in his best impression of Draco Malfoy, "It's very French. Very bogeyman."

The boy appears to realise he's being mocked, "One day wizards will fear to say it. They'll treat me with the respect I deserve."

"You don't get that through colourful titles and acts of terror," Harry says, "You have to do something to earn it."

The gaze that sidles to him is unimpressed, "You can just make them," he sounds almost petulant.

"Unearned loyalty out of fear is only as temporary as that fear persists.

And fear dies first. Hope dies last. If they hope you stand for something greater you'll never lose."

And Harry reaches out, his magic icing the pages and pressing through the fabric of reality. His finger presses against the pages and the letters unscramble back to their original, coated in a fine sheen of frost.

"Give them something to hope for, Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Harry hopes Dumbledore has other candidates for his chosen warrior, because this boy, this lion cub is growing into his fangs. And he is not Dumbledore's hope, or Harry's threat.

He could be. He could be Harry's demise.

He won't be. Tom might be a threat, but Tom will never be a threat to him.

*

Harry teaches him how to duel in the Chamber of Secrets. He slips in the second floor bathroom and then is forced to linger, because Harry had been planning on meeting him here.

The phantom has taken to watching some of the Gryffindor children. That little red-haired bossy first year whose parents served the Reaper. One of the Ravenclaw boys - a blonde in Tom's year who always looks like he's daydreaming - and his twin in Hufflepuff, also catch his eye. He watches them with a fondness that suggests he knows their parents but Tom doesn't care.

It doesn't matter. They can't see or talk to Harry. Only he can. Harry is his, still.

"Oh, you're back."

His ire, already present with the lack of the appearance of his wraith, grows at the voice of Drawling Draco.

"What's the excuse this time? It's the middle of the night."

Tom glances at the ghost who is perched cross-legged on the counter by the sinks. He's tracing a crack in the marble with almost nostalgia, a broken mirror behind him half-reflecting the ghost and half-reflecting Tom's pale face.

Tom doesn't answer and Malfoy sighs, leaning back. "Who am I going to tell?" he drawls, "I'm dead. Secrets don't mean anything to the dead."

"You report to Dumbledore," Tom says, aware that the Baron and the other house ghosts make direct reports to the Headmaster.

An eye roll. "Only if it's important. Or someone's in danger. I'm not… I'm not tied to the castle the way some of the ghosts are. I'm here because I got the option of my family home or here and I didn't want to put my mother through that."

"So you can move?" Tom ponders, "You're not tied to where you die?"

"It's easier," Malfoy shrugs. "I forget a lot of things but my death isn't one of them, unfortunately."

"Did you intend to become a ghost?" Tom asks, "Did you prepare a ritual? Did you bind yourself…?"

"Don't you *know* ?" Malfoy sniffs, "Oh, wait, you're a *mudblood* ." Tom barely contains his bristle at the term, "Well all pureblood children grow up knowing that we don't understand how ghosts form. They just do."

"I'm a half-blood," Tom is tired of correcting Malfoy, but that's a feature of ghosts. They don't retain new memories. Even the ghost is aware of it.

Oh, for sure they will remember for a few months. But compared to the memories formed when they were still flesh their translucent forms simply do not retain information the same way. They're a faded photo forever trapped in the moment it was taken, magic animating the facsimile of life that they cling to.

"Ghosts form when someone can't accept their own death."

He turns to Harry who is stalking down the length of the bathroom with the wariness of one who isn't sure if they should be there. But then Malfoy doesn't react to him anymore than any of the Hogwarts ghosts do and he relaxes.

Tom's nose wrinkles. *What does **that** mean* ? "Surely that's everyone," he says. "Nobody wants to die. But murder victims do not haunt their murderers, old parents do not stick around to see their children grow up."

“It’s not a conscious decision,” Harry says, “It’s a personality flaw. A stubborn conviction that they’re not really dead. Binns continues to teach. Nearly Headless Nick did not nearly lose his head. Draco Malfoy did not die before he even turned seventeen in a girl’s bathroom.”

“So it’s not replicable?”

“Not intentionally.”

“Who are you talking to?” Malfoy twists around to look at the empty bathroom, “At least you’re not hissing at snakes now,” he shudders.

“A Slytherin afraid of snakes,” Harry snorts, “ *Coward* . *Cur* .”

“ *Does this scare you?”* Tom hisses at the ghost. Draco Malfoy just looks offended.

“If you’re just going to hiss at me, I’ll leave,” he says, snottily. “I’ve better things to do anyway than watch mudbloods hang out in bathrooms. Have fun with your midnight escapades,” he leaves then, drifting through the floor.

“People are scared of what they don’t understand,” Harry says, “And you can’t hear how *weird* parseltongue sounds.”

“Like hisses?” Tom asks, dryly, *“Open* ,” it sounds like sibilant English to him, enough that he knows to shape his mouth into the hisses and snarling sibilance of parseltongue, but not enough that he can hear it. “Does it sound freakish?” he challenges, “ *Unnatural* ?”

Harry’s eyes are gleaming as the sink slides open, revealing the gaping giant pipe leading to the Chamber, “All my life I was told I was *unnatural* . A *freak* . Never, Tom.”

And it sounds like it’s a bitter, deep festering wound. Tom doesn’t push further. They all have their old hurts. He makes a mental note though, to use this in the future. For now he leaves it, steps back and gestures to the gaping maw of the pipe in front of them, “Allow me to show you the Chamber of Secrets.”

*

The Chamber is large, the air chilly the way places that never see the sun always are. Water spreads over the floor, and the gigantic, monkey-like face of Salazar Slytherin stares over his domain. His

beard spills out over the floor in great tendrils. Somewhere behind the statue the basilisk slumbers. Tom does not wake her, although a part of him longs to show her off to Harry. *This is my legacy . This is my power. Look at what I can do .*

He doesn't. He stands awkwardly and watches as Harry observes the serpents carved into the pillars.

"There aren't any side rooms or secret studies," he says, feeling somewhat deflated by that fact, "It was built to house the basilisk. There's no other purpose to this place. She's over a thousand years old. She's at least fifty feet. The legend goes that Salazar Slytherin put her down here to purge the castle of muggleborns."

He can feel Harry's eyes on him and instead he looks towards his ancestor.

"I hope he sees me now. Half-blood. A stain on the Gaunt name. Besmirching his precious Chamber. He was one of the first wizards they called a Dark Lord. After Morgana and Mordred."

Harry is silent. The phantom doesn't have footsteps and even his breathing Tom can't hear, not really aside from those moments when Harry is almost real enough to be solid. He is non-existent in the grand scheme of things. Except his knowledge is *very real* and Tom wants it, he turns to Harry now, because Harry promised him duelling tutoring.

"What is a Dark Lord?" he asks, "Why do they exalt *him* with that title - what did he do to deserve it?"

Harry hums, "It's a corrosion," he says, "Not a title. It's more of an insult. It's clearer to see with some perspective and worlds away, I guess, but a Dark Lord is just a man who fell too far in trying for his goals. Icarus falling. Lucifer ruined. Paradise lost."

"Are you calling him the devil?" Because Tom has read his scripture.

Those green eyes are eden-bright as Harry stretches out like a cat next to him, stalking closer. "He murdered your mother. Wouldn't you consider him a monster?"

Tom shrugs. "People die," he said, "Or they survive. I survived. She died. She was weak. The Reaper died. I guess that makes him weak too."

Harry reaches out, fingers trailing along Tom's jaw in the ghost of his touch, "So callous, Little Slytherin. Would you have followed him then? The Reaper. The One Who Walked With The Dead. That was another title they gifted him. The first time he stepped into a field and the dead stood to follow."

"I imagine the Ministry disapproved of necromancy," Tom says dryly. Harry gestures for him to step closer and he does so, the phantom shifting his limbs into position until Tom stands in a duelling pose.

"Side on, but angled. Present the smallest target." He's static along Tom's arms as he instructs, "He wasn't all necromancy. He wasn't death and ruin. But the dead have secrets they take to their grave, sometimes you have to open a few tombs to find what you're looking for."

"So he was just chaos then," Tom twists his body, watching where he positions his feet, "Chaos and destruction and a childish attempt at a rebellion that got crushed. It didn't even last five years." He draws his wand and takes aim.

"Shoulders back," Harry murmurs, softly, "Knees slightly bent. Weight on the balls of your feet. Did you know that four magical children in my year were born with siblings?"

Tom's head snaps to him. His form is stiff. That's not true, surely. Pureblood families are huge, aren't they? The Blacks have hundred of cousins. There seem to be at least ten Weasleys at any one time.

But no. There are a pair of twins in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The Carrow twins in his year. He thinks there might be a Gryffindor who has a younger brother.

"Birth rates of magical blood have dropped by fifty percent in the past hundred years. My year was small anyway - we were a war year - but when you compare it to Dumbledore's graduating year it's half the size. Births are more difficult. Even muggleborn numbers are dropping. Miscarriage numbers are increasing. Death from childbirth is no longer uncommon. It should be. We have magic. Can we not prevent this?"

Tom can see where this is going. He can see the conundrum.

"Magic is dying," he concludes. "What did the Reaper promise? Did he promise to fix it? Did he promise a better world? What lies did he tell them that so many laid down their lives and wands at his feet?"

"He died for them." Harry's voice is barely a whisper. He's so close standing before Tom, yet all Tom can feel is the faintest taste of mint on his tongue. "So when he stepped back before them living flesh and blood and asked for their help in making a new world to help magic recover and regrow nobody hesitated. Not one."

"A new world?" It sounds fanciful. It sounds fake.

"Total separation. No statute of secrecy. No memory charms. No muggle-repelling. No worry about underage magic." Harry's breath is the bitter cold of winter, "Don't you ever get tired of hiding?"

Tom aches for this dream. Harry's words paint a future so vivid he *yearns* . For a moment he can see the vision that must have so enraptured so many wizards, the singular unrelenting root burrowing deep.

Freedom.

The Dark Lord promised them freedom.

He sees satisfaction bloom in Harry's eyes as he observes Tom's realisation. There's something else there. Something, coveted, something possessive-- but then Harry's shifting, hands guiding Tom around to stand back to him, left shoulder forwards, "Avoid twisting when you're casting, use your right arm to counterbalance your movements. Simplifying wand movements comes with time and practice. Never waste movement. There are several spell combinations designed to bleed into each other saving you an added movement. We start with a knockback jinx--"

Harry's calm instructions coax him through the combination, standing at Tom's back and correcting his form with the slightest of touches. If Tom stops paying attention, it's almost like he's physically present.

(It doesn't occur to him that he's put his back to Harry. Thoughtlessly. Trustingly. *Don't put your back to your enemy.* It doesn't occur to him that Harry could be considered an enemy.)

(It's also unclear if Harry is aware of this, and if he is then Harry doesn't bother to correct him.)

*

His third year is unremarkable. Nobody dies. The year is almost boring.

Professor Merrythought retires after one year. Her arthritis is too painful to allow her to continue despite the begging from Dumbledore. She was a good teacher too.

Harry was better.

Harry is almost smug when Dumbledore announces her retirement with a strained smile. Too smug.

“Who wants to bet how long the next teacher will last?” Rosier asks, “And if they’re competent - because Quirrel and Lockhart weren’t particularly… memorable.”

Avery, unusually, looks a little grim, “Dumbledore already has a candidate. Didn’t you hear? Rose Weasley’s been talking about it for the past two weeks. Her mother’s got the job.”

“Hermione Granger?”

“Granger-Weasley,” Avery corrects. “I don’t think Dumbledore picked her. I don’t think anyone would given… given her husband. But my father’s on the board of governors and they made the decision.” He’s staring at Tom, with only a small measure of concern, and leans in closer, voice low, “Do you think Granger-Weasley is coming here to teach because Dumbledore couldn't find any candidates?” He asks, “Or do you think she's coming here to kill you?”

“She's a ministry official,” Tom sneers.

Avery looks doubtful, “So you think she won't try anything?”

Tom's smile makes Avery shudder at the glint in his eyes, “Not in public.”

leader

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom's fourth year has bated breath and hushed whispers. Tom's fourth year starts with Hermione Granger-Weasley being introduced as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Hermione is teaching at Hogwarts.

The poor children.

Harry thinks he's hallucinating at first; that he's imagining it all. Because there is *no way* that impatient, intelligent *Hermione* (who could barely stand children when she was one) is now teaching.

He's amazed (and a little furious) that Dumbledore even let her.

Beneath his feet he can feel his curse rooted deep. The simplest kind of magic. The hardest to unravel. It's not for the lack of trying. He's watched Dumbledore dive into the tangled web of spells that form Hogwarts' protection. He's watched him draw near a strand of the curse and seen it lash out with fangs and talons and for Dumbledore to draw back, *burned* .

The curse is not runes. It is not spoken incantations and woven ley lines.

It's Harry's resentment and bitterness taken form. Manifested into a physical thing. It's small and petty and it has brought him an inordinate amount of satisfaction over the years at watching Dumbledore's ongoing ire.

(“Professor Dumbledore,” he says. Unfailingly, unflinchingly polite even with their widening difference in opinions on education and magic. The jar of lemon drops sits on the headmaster’s desk.

Dumbledore does not offer him one. He hasn’t since Sirius died.

“Harry,” Dumbledore looks up from the paper he’d been perusing, “Ah, yes, I was just reviewing Remus’ letter. You’ve been assisting him for most of the year, correct?”

Dumbledore knows this. Harry nods anyway.

“I ran the Defence club for most of fifth and sixth year too,” he says, “I like teaching. I like Hogwarts. I know Remus isn’t retiring imminently but he’s not planning to teach forever. He said he’d take me on as an apprentice, that is, if you’d be prepared to fund it. The role has existed before - the matron usually has an apprentice salaried. The previous astronomy teacher also did their apprenticeship for four years before replacing their mentor. I’m planning on achieving my Mastery in Defence - I’ve got the highest on OWLs in Defence, a corporeal patronus at thirteen and although NEWT results haven’t dropped I know I passed with Outstanding.”

Harry stops. He’s not sure what gives it away. Dumbledore is listening, engaged, hands pressed together. Remus’ letter discussing his request for Harry’s apprenticeship sits on the desk, crisp edges unfolded, parchment still slightly curled.

Harry thinks about the previous times he’s been in this office. The various detentions in his early years. The life changing decisions regarding his guardianship. That one *desperate* time where all he had wanted to do was scream, but all he could do was stare numbly as Dumbledore dropped platitudes on him like broken plates. And that one time he’d sat here and lied, words slipping off his tongue like honeyed velvet even while his heart beat a mile a minute and he attempted to memorise the feel of the castle beneath his feet in fear that he might soon lose it.

He does that now. Reaches out his magic to curl tangles into the lifeblood of the castle. This is his home, he thinks, he is part of its walls now. He breathes with her, he bleeds with her.

When Dumbledore opens his mouth to cut him away it hurts a little less to be able to lean into her embrace. Harry barely hears the words through the tinnitus in his ears. *You’re young . More life experience . Maybe in a few years .*

He’s a puppet on strings as he thanks Dumbledore for his time. He is an emptied out suit of armour as he marches from the office. He is a corpse made living as he finds himself in one of the courtyards, warm with the summer sun as it sets over the Scottish hills.

He is rage and fury and *this is his home* he thinks, sinking to his knees. He doesn’t scream, not verbally, not in the way he will fall to his knees in the Ministry Atrium half a decade and a whole plane away

from now. His mouth opens, his eyes sting and his magic reaches out like the snake heads of a hydra and *bites* .

Something catches. Something gives. Something sinks into the ground, the soil, the very air. A small, innocuous seed woven of his emotions in this moment buried into Hogwarts' heart.)

(Remus' infliction as a werewolf gets outed at the end of the following year. A student runs their mouth about the wolfsbane they see in his office, the newspaper runs the story, he's forced to resign. With no replacements lined up Dumbledore is forced to hire an auror who is currently on medical leave from active service. Half-way through the year the withering curse they were inflicted with requires hospitalisation. The year after, a keen young lady with awards from the International Duelling Circuit makes it until February before an accident in the potions lab ends her promising career early. Then it's an international graduate looking for experience who moves back abroad after a year. A foreign teacher whose family grows sick and they have to leave. A particularly memorable Ministry researcher who gets eaten by a dark spell of his own making during a classroom demonstration.)

(These are just the start of many.)

(He meets Harry's gaze with just a bit more care in the future. *Good* , Harry thinks. *You should be wary* .)

*

Harry sits with Rosie Weasley. He should be godfather, he thinks, and he sort of is. She has no named godparent, he knows that role is his and would be, were he here.

(She was born when he was a year in the Ethereal already, but he has watched her grow throughout various stages of her life).

She is thirteen and she is a miniature Hermione is all but looks. She favours her dad's colouring - freckles and red hair. She is usually found with her nose in a book, while her friends play Exploding Snap nearby. She has inherited her mother's uncanny ability to singularly focus on her reading with undivided attention.

She had her father's talent in sport and her mother's viciousness. She has her mother's bushy hair and her father's eyes.

(A part of Harry wonders if he'd have had his own children by now,

were things a little different. He brutally crushes that thought. He has made his choice. He will live by it.)

Tom catches him lingering by the Gryffindor table precisely once. “What are you doing?” he had asked.

Jealous .

Harry is touched by the little Slytherin’s audacity. “It pays to know what’s going on elsewhere,” he says, mildly. And he steps back to the side of the boy who, at the end of the day, is his chosen haunt. He has limited options, really, but even then--

Rose and her friends are children. They have childish wants and needs and the most important thing in her life is whether she’s going to drop Muggle Studies for Care of Magical Creatures. She has *no ambition* .

(Then again neither had Harry at her age. That had come later, burned to the wick with blood and fire and death.)

Harry settles down at Tom’s side in the fourth year classroom, watching as Hermione launches into a lecture. Avery and Rosier already have glazed eyes. Nott is frantically scribbling. Tom’s making occasional notes but for the most part Harry has already taught the boy these spells. Tom doesn’t need to pay attention. Not really. He has his book open four chapters ahead and is reading that instead.

“If she served the Reaper,” Harry warns the boy who isn’t paying attention to the lecture anyway, “She didn’t get caught. Most of his followers weren’t arrested. They weren’t marked visibly. They didn’t parade their faces in the paper. She has children. She has a Ministry job she will return to. She isn’t a threat.”

Tom’s brown eyes blink at him, contemplating Harry’s words, “I killed her Lord,” he murmurs.

"Not proven." Harry doesn’t feel particularly dead, and he knows the vows he and Hermione and Ron twisted themselves into won’t feel very dead either, particularly the rather nasty curse Hermione found to tie around their throats like a chain.

Till death , he believed were the words they vowed. *Till death or success* and… well… both were still pending.

“I killed her Lord,” Tom says again, “Wouldn’t you want revenge?”

How perfectly vengeful, Harry thinks, “Not everyone is out for revenge, Little Slytherin," he croons, but if anyone were to come up with a particularly vicious retribution, it would be Hermione. “Still, maybe we should go over some basic defences we can ward into your robes. Just in case.”

Tom’s glare is one of pure spite.

*

Harry follows Hermione through the castle, curious. He tries to reach out, to brush blackened fingertips over her hand. He can almost feel her warmth, her pulse beating in her wrist--

She turns away, oblivious.

He draws back. It’s an old hurt but it doesn’t fade, every time he tries and fails to reach out to his friends. To his left hand. She paces down the corridors, bushy hair bouncing. Her destination is a familiar one - *Merlin* - the number of times he had followed her on this path to the library. The nostalgia is a lump in his throat.

She strolls in with a casualness and confidence that the librarian doesn’t look twice at. Especially not when she turns sharply and heads for the Restricted Section.

Harry frowns, “What are you doing, Hermione?” he asks.

She doesn’t hear him.

She never does.

She slides among the shelves, picking out tomes on Defence curses - all things that conceivable could be used for a lesson. Harry almost turns away, knowing from experience that she will be busy for likely the whole afternoon now. But then she drops one onto the pile.

He pauses. He recognises the title. It’s one he’d made Tom take out with a letter of permission from Lockhart two years ago. A particularly frail and old book which mentioned the Veil, but only in a clinical, detached manner before talking about other theoretical discussions and philosophies of death.

It also - in a similarly detached and clinical manner, more referenced than discussed - mentions the resurrection stone.

(Tom hadn’t noticed when they’d read through it, dismissing it as a passing fancy.)

Oh, Harry thinks, watching Hermione’s book choice with new eyes. He spots the tomes on magical creatures, and one of creatures of the feywild that he *knows* talks about travel there. Another book that mentions astral projection and tethers slipped between two thin personal memoirs from ex-duellists on curses of the body and duelling techniques.

She's not really here to teach, he realises, looking at the stack of books she's taken from the Restricted Section. She's here to *research* . And, he thinks, eyeing up the titles, it's not just out of professional curiosity.

She's looking for him.

*

Harry's oddly jubilant. It’s almost irritating, except he’s taken to lingering at Tom’s side more often lately. He's got a small smile etched onto his face, a spark to his eyes and he actually looks his age for once, twenty-three and crashing Tom's Defence class like he's an older brother watching over the children. He's twitchy, and Tom would be almost fearful of some disaster striking were he not so confident that Harry is a world away.

"She must be out to get me," Tom murmurs to Harry, voice pitched low enough not to carry, "Why else would she take this job? She has a successful ministry career!"

"Not everyone is out to get you," Harry sounds like he's laughing.

Tom’s lip curls downwards. And maybe Harry is right. Except he recognises this woman. He remembers seeing her in Diagon Alley two years ago, remembers her clinical look as she recognised him. The concern in her voice that soured to neutrality and something *else* .

“I’ll keep an eye on her for you,” Harry’s tone is a tad *too* mild. “But you have nothing to fear from Hermione Granger-Weasley.” It’s like he knows just as well as Tom that just because she didn't get caught doesn't mean she didn't do anything.

Tom doesn't think that's true. The whole world is structured around an eye for an eye. Dog eat dog. And when the Dark Lord fell, Tom was the only one still breathing. His due is owed, anyone can see that.

She's polite enough to him in class.

It's *almost* galling. "Five points to Slytherin," she says, the perfect poise of neutrality. She is not Harry's fierce tempers or Tom's quiet rage, she is too clinical in her demeanour. Too buried in books and hard fast facts. She's not a natural teacher - she learns by rote, and teaches them the textbook inside out.

"There were talks about an International Tournament," says Avery as they start the practical aspect of the lesson, "But the votes at the Ministry overturned the idea. Said it was too dangerous."

"Too dangerous?" Nott repeats, "There was a *death toll* ."

" *She* petitioned against it," Avery jerks his head to where their professor is showing Flora and Hestia Carrow the correct wand movement for several varieties of non-lethal banishing jinxes. "Wonder why - could have used it as a convenient excuse to kill you off," he says, rather too chirpily to Tom. He wilts a little under Tom's piercing gaze.

Harry's laughing in his ear. Tom ignores him and throws a perfect banishment jinx at Avery, sending the other flying across the classroom. His fingers tap along the caramel wood of his wand, red sparks spitting from the end in his triumph. When he glances towards Harry with a smug tilt to his chin, the phantom is not watching him.

He's got his green gaze fixed on Professor Granger-Weasley who, in turn, is watching Tom hold his wand with sharp brown eyes. She meets his gaze for a moment before nodding at his successful casting and turning away to Mulciber.

But there had been a moment - a flash of a second when she had looked at Tom with a flash of nostalgia and he knew that it had not been Tom she had been seeing in that moment.

*

Tom is tired of waiting.

(He is not a Gryffindor but what he is about to do even Harry would consider *reckless* . But Harry too, one evening, chased after his supposedly-murderous godfather, so that's a poor standard of comparison.)

He lurches to his feet later that evening, destination set already. He

leaves half-way through Avery babbling about his father's recent property acquisition.

The other boy is left stuttering in surprise, "Where are you going?" Avery startles, "Tom? Tom!" But Tom is already gone, vanishing through the common room entrance way.

Once safely outside he pulls Harry's invisibility cloak from its usual place in his inner robe pocket, sweeping it over him. He takes a moment to ensure he is properly hidden - he's getting tall and the last thing he would want is for a stray foot or ankle to give him away.

(Harry is not around, he has slipped between here and there in the way he does sometimes, and whether he's tired and his magic has waned or whether he is lurking around another student Tom doesn't want to think about, anger flaring at the thought).

His location is the Defence classroom: it doesn't take him long to get to. Not with the combination of shortcuts he has discovered and those Harry has pointed out when he was feeling generous. It's not locked. Inside is empty with deep shadows stretching out. It gets redecorated each year to match the aesthetic of the revolving door of teachers passing through. In his first year there was a large number of decapitated heads and complicated anatomy drawings of monsters. The following year the whole room was shaded in lilac and baby blue with every spare wall featuring Gilderoy Lockhart smiling out.

Last year was once again more practical - posters and general informatics. It appears like Granger has kept some of Merrythought's study aids because Tom recognises that one poster about having your wand on you at all times. It's old. It's been folded too many times and the crease in the middle nearly tears it in two.

Warning: The Dark Lord Could Strike At Any Moment .

A lightning bolt crashes into a house and then as Tom watches twists into a wand.

Be ready. Be prepared.

The office is up the spiralling staircase in the corner of the room. Tom slips the cloak off, confident nobody else is around as he ascends the stairs. The door at the top is locked, but Tom has magic. It clicks open on the third unlocking spell he tries, slithering inside.

Her office is filled with books. Not surprising - her clinical lecture

style and corrections on his coursework *scream* bookworm. Rule-keeper. He flicks through the titles, pausing when several catch his interest.

They're a couple he had taken out last year. One about magical transportation and portals. One about resurrection rituals from history. Another about souls although it had been vague and in abstract terms.

They'd been books he'd been using to research how to get Harry out of the ethereal plane.

Curious , he thinks. *Curious indeed* .

There's a pile of essays and that's it. He lets the book fall to the desk, disappointed. There is a hollow thump as it lands. His fingers tap the wood. It resonates and he circles around the desk. There's no visible drawer. But Tom knows magic enough to understand there doesn't need to be.

"Revelio ," he murmurs, and the illusion fades, revealing three drawers. Also locked.

Easy.

The top one looks like Granger's work from the Ministry. The draft of a bill that looks like a proposal for muggleborn education pre-Hogwarts. There's an annotated page of something in thick legal jargon, the scrawl recognisable as his teachers'. There's yet another book on law and Tom closes the drawer, going for the one underneath.

Another book. He's not even surprised. It's a book of children's stories, of all things, with parchment shoved in at various increments. He slides a piece out. A rune is drawn on the paper - a triangle with a line and a circle entombed within.

The wand? Is written in a messy scrawl that is not his teacher's. He doesn't recognise it at all - it's a scrawling cursive that is written in, he realises, a muggle pen. There are sheafs of papers with this same handwriting. A slim black notebook beneath it all. He flicks it open, paging through. There are dates and people's names. Artefact details. Something being tracked and searched for.

A name catches his attention. *The Peverell Ring -> Gaunt?*

He knows with unerring certainty whose handwriting this is. Whose notes he holds in his hands. The Reaper's messy cursive etched into parchment, dedicated in its obsession, speaks of magical intricacies Tom can't even hope to understand.

(He wanted a new world, Harry had told him, but what does a ring and his family have to do with a new world?)

There's a sound from the classroom, startling him out of his reverie. He jolts, heart thumping like a rabbit in his chest. Parchment creases beneath his fingers as he shoves it back into the drawer, shoves them closed. The invisibility cloak is smooth beneath his fingers as he swings it over himself. He takes some slow steps towards the edge of the office keeping the door within reach, yet out of the way, lingering in the shadows where he could potentially slip out, unseen--

The door opens before he gets there. Professor Granger-Weasley steps through, hair as bushy and flustered as ever. Tom takes another slow step towards the door.

He comes up short when it swings again, someone stepping through behind his teacher. A man. He's lanky - ginger hair, freckles. The man does not gaze around the room with the eyes of one who is seeing it for the first time. There's a familiarity as he lingers in the doorway.

Tom eyes up the man. He recognises him. Blue eyes. Red hair. Tom remembers him from photos and newspaper clippings of the highly publicised trial that took place shortly following the Dark Lord's defeat.

He's in Tom's way.

Tom remains where he is, holding his breath. Maybe he should have come here with Harry. Maybe he should have told someone else he was coming here.

Maybe she won't notice, he thinks. Maybe she won't--

She stills. Her fingers tap on the wood of the drawers. The *visible* drawers. "Someone's been here," she says, looking up sharply at her companion. Her wand is in her hand. The tip is lighting up, a pale wash of orange.

Tom *moves* .

But not quickly enough.

The *homenum revelio* catches the edge of the cloak, glowing orange.

(Tom should really learn to stop sneaking into places he shouldn't be by now)

A spell slams into him and the world goes black.

*

Ron can feel Hermione's gaze on him as he trusses the boy up in enough rope to make him look almost comically restrained. "He's a child," she reminds him, pointedly.

"I'm not hurting him," Ron points out in return. "Let's wake him up and find out *why* he was sneaking into your office, shall we?"

"I told you already," Hermione says, "He's just like Harry. He's been jumpy around me all year - *and* he's a Slytherin. He probably just wants to make sure I won't kill him."

"We'll see. *Enervate* ."

The boy jerks awake. His brown eyes widen as he quickly takes note of his situation. His gaze flickers between Ron and Hermione - the one a criminal who is supposed to be on house arrest - the other his teacher.

And then his gaze does a weird thing. It slides sideways again, focussing on a spot that doesn't exist between the desk and the wall. His body - initially tense, straining against the ropes - relaxes, fingers twitching.

Ron crouches before the boy, taking up his gaze, "Hello," he says, his smile grim as he eyes up the fourth-year Slytherin, "I'd introduce myself but judging from your expression you know who I am. And you don't need an introduction, do you, Tom Riddle?"

His brown eyes are defiant. His gaze does that thing again where he looks to one side and back, before answering, "You're not meant to be here," the boy says with all the confidence of someone who thinks they're right, "Don't you have a tracking charm on you?"

"Yes," Ron says, shrugging, "I unravel it from time to time to go wandering. I like to catch children sneaking out after hours and leave them strung up in the Great Hall as offerings to my Lord." He enjoys the way the boy schools his features to try and mask the alarm, but

doesn't quite manage. He enjoys even more the realisation flare; confusion over trying to parse out if this is a lie or a joke.

"You wouldn't," Riddle challenges.

Ron just raises an eyebrow, silently.

The boy's lip quirks, unimpressed. His eyes do that odd flicker to the side again, "You're not funny," he says, dryly, "You can't kill me. They'd find out."

Okay, time to *correct* this assumption, "I'm not going to kill you," he says, "If I was you'd already be dead."

"Obliviate me then," the boy challenges, "We both know you're not meant to be here. If the Ministry finds out they'd throw you in Azkaban. You're tagged - you're not meant to be visiting your wife at Hogwarts. And I'm pretty sure she isn't meant to be using Hogwarts' library to look into ways to resurrect the Reaper."

And *oh*--

Oh. There's the fire. That edge to those brown eyes. The defiance. He's in Slytherin, he'd been all poise and refinement until the threat and the situation hits and then he's feral. He's a fighter.

He's Harry, just with some more polish here and a wild streak there. He's Harry left to fend for himself in the cold for too long. He's Harry as Ron remembers him at eleven - a remarkably vicious eleven-year old with an oddly detached way of viewing things, even before he almost fell through the Veil of Death.

He can't help himself. He eyes up the boy, the words escaping him before he fully realises it. "You remind me of *him* ," Ron Weasley says. The boy gets an adorable dimple as he frowns, trying to ponder if it's a compliment or an insult.

It's neither. Just an observation.

This boy is Harry unrefined. All that anger and fury at the world, all that bite and ambition uncaged and buried into the body of this boy with snake's venom. Harry had kept his claws and fangs sheathed, padded it with family and friends and all the good things and this boy--

This boy is ambition unleashed. He is Harry at his most obsessed, at

his most dangerous. His muscles are tense - he does not relax for a moment, always waiting for the moment to strike.

Ron does not let go of the boy's wand. Harry's wand, he notes, idly, how *crass* of Dumbledore to offer the boy this wand, how *audacious* of the boy to use it. He sighs, at least Harry's wand has a worthy successor, "Who would you tell?" he drawls, twisting the yew wand in his hand, "Dumbledore? The Ministry? I've been slipping out for years and they've not caught me yet. They won't believe the word of a schoolboy."

"Oh, but I'm not just any schoolboy," the boy blinks wide-eyed and beguiling, "I'm the boy-who- *survived* . Their little hero. They'll hang off every word I say."

A *threat* . Was this *boy* threatening…?

"Killing you it is," Ron's had enough. He lifts his wand.

*

Tom is pretty sure Weasley wasn't actually going to kill him. His wand surges with power, he can feel it crackling in the air but there's no incantation, no spell and then it doesn't matter because Granger-Weasley is stepping between them with angry hisses.

"We are *not* going to do this, Ronald!"

"What's the alternative? If he tells Dumbledore we'll never get a moment's peace. We'll have chains around our necks like *dogs* , we'll have no freedom--"

Tom had been right, he thinks, vindictively. They were trying to resurrect their Lord.

"They're not going to hurt you," Harry says from where he had been lurking ever since Tom woke up.

Of course he'd turn up *now. After* Tom has managed to get himself caught. He wants to snap at the man, to curse him to the four winds but he can't do anything more than glare in Harry's general direction. And even that he can't keep doing. Granger-Weasley has turned to look in Harry's direction twice already, her gaze sliding past by at least a metre.

Harry ignores her and Weasley. For all his previous fascination with

the new teacher his attention is fixed solely on Tom.

They're not going to hurt you, Harry had said, but *how do you know that* ? Tom wants to ask. What proof does he have, what guarantee?

"They're parents," Harry says in answer to his silent discomfort, "They have a daughter. You're a *child* to them." Tom *does not* bristle at the implication, "Be wide eyed and innocent. Be smart and curious. For god's sake don't mention anything about basilisks, Lockhart or dark magic. And Tom?" Brown eyes meet green for the briefest of seconds, "Don't mention me."

He looks away, trying to pretend that he was never looking anywhere but at his teacher and her husband. Trying not to pretend he didn't spot the possessiveness in those silver-sheened eyes that makes shivers crawl down his spine.

"You can't hurt me," he says, more confidently that he feels, "Dumbledore would never stand for it."

Somehow, that is the wrong thing to say. A dark shadow passes over Weasley's face, "Oh, he'd stand by all right," he mutters, darkly, "He's very passive in his care for children in these halls. Didn't you hear? Children die under his watch." There's a weight there Tom can't untangle right now.

"We're not going to hurt you," Granger-Weasley says like she's speaking to a caged animal, all soothing and hands outstretched like that's somehow reassuring, "We don't hurt children."

"Tell your boss that," the words are torn from his throat before he can think twice.

Both adults still. Neither really appear to have much response to that, but neither denies it.

This is a new experience, Tom muses, being kidnapped and tied to a chair by one of his teachers. Efficiently too, he can feel the *incarcerous* pinning him down. He is not going to be able to get out of here easily. Maybe if they leave, maybe if they give him some time--

Instead Granger-Weasley picks something up from the desk, "Where did you find this?"

Tom's gaze skims over the silvery fabric, the sheen the same iridescence that Harry's eyes go when he's irritated. Her fingers ripple

in and out of view as she runs her hand over it. Her voice is deceptively light, but weighted. Like they're stepping around burning coals and afraid to burn themselves.

"A gift," Harry answers for Tom, and Tom repeats the answer to her.

"From a friend," he says, voice not wavering. "A gift."

Her gaze is sharp but she doesn't say anything further, just sends her husband a heavy look. Weasley lets out a put-upon sigh. "You obliviate him then," he says, "I'm always clumsy with that spell."

"We're not going to obliviate him," Granger-Weasley says. "We're going to let him go."

" *What?* " Weasley chokes.

"What?" Tom stares in disbelief. "Aren't you worried I'll tell Dumbledore? About your plans? About Weasley being here when he's not meant to leave a two hundred foot radius of his house? You served the Reaper, are you going to try and kill me, then, to finish what he started? You're his followers. His…" He tries to remember the name, comes up blank. Has anyone ever told him? Or was this one of things he was meant to find out in a book?

"His *knights* ?" Weasley is fiddling with a coin, flipping it in the air. The golden galleon flashes in the light and he catches it again, "His soldiers? His *army* ? He didn't like that term, but yes."

"Aren't you going to exact your revenge?" his gaze swings wildly between the pair.

"On who?" Ron snorts, "A twelve-year old kid?"

"I'm *fifteen* !"

"You didn't kill the Reaper. You weren't even born. Your mother was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Those words should probably hurt. But the truth is Tom doesn't feel bad the Reaper killed his mother. He never knew her. He doesn't miss her. He doesn't feel angry for her.

He doesn't feel anything for her.

"You're not going to tell anyone," Granger-Weasley says, lightly. "I've watched you. You don't like Dumbledore anymore than we do. He's

let you down too. Who else would you go to? Slughorn? McGonagall? No, you don't go running to the adults. You deal with it yourself."

"And your plans? You're trying to resurrect the Reaper!"

"Are we?" she says, mildly, "So you tell Dumbledore my reading list - I'm sure he already knows every book I take out of the library here. And the Reaper… well… he's dead. No body. No remains. Just a wand and you."

"I'm not your Lord," Tom curls his lip.

"No. You're a child. Our Lord is gone. We have family, jobs, a life - we're not going to endanger our lives in trying to resurrect the cause without him. We're not a threat to you, Tom Riddle."

"Aren't we?" Weasley mutters darkly behind her.

She ignores him, instead flicking her wand out and the ropes binding Tom release. He's on his feet in a moment, and his wand clatters across the room and flies into his hand. He levels it at them.

Tom does not know the picture he makes. The tightly controlled fury buried under his skin. Tom Riddle is not emotionless. It's more like the negative emotions are dialled up and the good ones barely present. So anger? Hate? They're always there. He shakes a little with the force of it and he knows at least five curses that will make these adults *bleed.*

"Don't," Harry is there. He looks--

Concerned is not the right word. He is oppressive - a looming storm promising snow and hail. Tom's breath frosts in the air and he shivers. He is not afraid.

"Tom," Harry croons, brushing intangible fingers through his hair, thumbing his split lip from where he must have hit the floor. He can almost feel fingertips pressing against the blood welling there, "Be smart. Pick your battles. You're good, but they're better. For now. They won't hurt you."

You sound so sure, Tom tries to communicate with his gaze, *how do you know that* ?

"You're of little use dead. But if you make yourself a threat… Little Slytherin, don't tempt fate, you have great things to do. *Mor vincit*

omnia . But not this time. Not for us."

"Death always wins," Tom translates, quietly, relenting to Harry and lowering his wand. The adults barely look fazed but he notes Weasley removing his hand from where it had rested on his own willow wand.

Granger-Weasley stares at him with a sharp glance at those words. "What did--" she cuts herself off, "Besides," she says, "I'm sure you'd hate for Dumbledore to find out your forays into dark magic."

Tom tries not to let his face pale, "I don't know what you're talking about," he says.

"Did you know?" Granger-Weasley says, tone deceptively light, "They can view the last spells cast on your wand. Make sure to cover them over in the future."

It feels less like a noose of blackmail around his neck and more like a slap on the wrist. A gentle chiding from a teacher. It feels a bit like Harry, gently correcting his duelling stance in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Here," she holds out the invisibility cloak to him, "That's a rare artefact. Look after it." In the background Weasley is pulling a face, but Tom reaches out and takes back the cloak.

"He wasn't much, was he?" Tom dares ask, *dares* to curl his tongue over the words as he turns to leave, "The Reaper. Dark Lord or not… he was still just a man. Just human. He died like everyone else."

(He's so busy looking at her reaction he doesn't see the sharp grin flash across Harry's face, quick and fleeting, a jackal's laugh.)

Granger-Weasley does not look upset. She does not look like the words have even hit her at all. Tom's disappointed when all she does is look at him with seemingly unending sadness. "Did you never ask Professor Dumbledore why the Reaper went after your family?" Granger asks, almost gently. Tom opens his mouth because he *knows* this, he's *asked,* it's because he's of Slytherin's line--

His mouth closes. Because nobody had said that. He's *assumed* . It's the only thing he can think of. Gaunt had meant Slytherin and the Reaper had gone after the last living Gaunts. Except he'd gone after plenty of ancient families and not left them devastated and ruined. And even that he'd hardly done - Morfin was alive somewhere. His mother had died but that had been almost unintentional. A side-effect.

“Dumbledore’s just trying to protect you,” Granger-Weasley says, “But you’re not naive. You don’t need protection. You deserve to know. Next time you see him: ask him.”

*

(“Did you notice?” Hermione asks Ron with a frown as the fourth year Slytherin flees her office.

Ron is silent for a long time; she's almost convinced he didn’t hear her when he answers, “His duelling pose. It’s the same as Harry’s. And the cloak… Do you think…?”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” she promises.)

Chapter End Notes

> In an alternative sequence of events that didn't happen:
> Ron's teaching at Hogwarts. Ron Weasley is teaching at Hogwarts.
>
> There's the punchline of a bad joke here but Harry's not yet found it. He watches as his friend stands like some horrifying red haired general shouting at the fifth years he's currently making run an assault course.
>
> "I can't believe he stole my lesson plan," Harry complains to himself, bitterly.

obsession

The man *runs* .

He stumbles over the tiled floor. Blood oozes from the stump of an arm. He has it cradled to his chest, crudely wrapped, and occasionally he reaches out with the arm to grab onto something, only to be vividly reminded of the lack of arm.

His heart thuds in his chest. He wishes it would slow. With every pulsing beat his arm chugs out another few drops of precious precious blood. The healing spells are already unravelling and fading but there's no time to try and recast them now. He is so close. *So close.* Away from the dementors, the cells, the Ministry aurors that have been chasing after him and that one unrelenting *hound* that is *still chasing him.*

This might hurt, he thinks, trying to envision his other form. The rat with brown fur and sharp eyes and nimble paws and his body starts to twist--

"Not this time. *Peter* . *Behave* ."

Something slams into him. Wraps into his magic like a leech and *drains* and he lets out a cry as the transformation is interrupted before it begins.

"You almost slipped away. Fool me once, fool me twice, but three times? Is that why you cut off your arm? It almost fooled Ron, it was a good move."

His fingers which have curled over his wand, clinging to his magic like a lifeline, now twist, words of harm and damage ready but--

His fingers spasm, his tongue *burns* . His wand clatters to the floor and his back arches. The being stalking casually after him tuts their tongue in disappointment, "You can't *hurt me* . Magic won't allow it. I asked for mercy on your behalf once. That's a debt owed."

Peter Pettigrew twists to meet Harry's gaze. He can feel the thrumming echo of what he owes this boy who had once had *so much* mercy. Harry looks so much like James it hurts, like a physical blow. "Harry," he begs, "Harry, *please* -- James and Lily, they wouldn't want you to do this. They were good people. The best people."

“They’re dead,” Harry says, and it’s with a deliberate casualness that his wand flashes out and ropes erupt from the ground, wrapping around Pettigrew’s shoulders and pinning him in place, “You killed them.” Another flash of his wand and the stub of his arm starts bleeding again, freshly. “And then you killed Sirius. But that’s on me, really,” another flash of that caramel yew wand, “If I’d just let them kill you in the first place we wouldn’t be here.”

Don’t kill me, I can help you, I can be useful, please -- the pleas are never verbalised, choked up in a moan of pain as Harry’s wand flashes and cuts tear themselves open across his body.

The air is cold.

“I did tell you,” there’s something cracking in Harry’s voice, “I promised you to the dementors once. It’s time I made good on that promise.”

Through a teary gaze Pettigrew blinks at James’ form. Except James had never looked like this - all sharp angles and ink-black hair. All bone and shadowed hollows. And his eyes are not Lily’s.

Harry’s eyes have the look of one who’s been bathing in belladonna.

There’s a shadow drifting towards him with skeletal black fingers of rot and a maw of too many teeth beneath that hood and all Pettigrew feels is *fear* as the dementor reaches for him.

“It’s going to be a new world,” Harry croons, “You just won’t be there to see it.”

*

Tom Riddle stands in the doorway to his office.

Albus Dumbledore looks at the boy. He’s grown taller - fifteen and all lanky teenage limbs with none of the poor coordination that sometimes hits teenage boys. He’s edging from the cute round face to a sharp jaw and glittering eyes that will have a lot of other students swooning. His smile: cautious, bland, polite. He remembers another - green eyes, cautious tone, *(“Professor, I was wondering if you’d considered the possibility that Black could be innocent? If Pettigrew was still alive, would that not imply we’ve misunderstood the situation?”)*

“Professor, I was wondering if I might be able to ask you some questions. With our Defence teacher this year everyone is talking…

whispering … about the Reaper. And the reason why he went after my family…"

He blinks and the images overlap and then the one vanishes. Harry Potter is not here and Tom Riddle is and he's been expecting this.

"Take a seat."

*

Dumbledore defeats Gellert Grindelwald in the summer. May. School is still open, exams locking students indoors. In the time between Harry and his friends sit on Hogwarts ground. OWLs have them all a little crazy as Seamus and Ron play-fight on the shore of the Black Lake. Neville is stitching up a hole some monstrous plant or other has chewed in his robe and Hermione is watching Luna complete a Quibbler riddle with undisguised horror.

"They're offering him positions at the Ministry. Dumbledore, that is," Harry says, "Do you think he'll even come back to Hogwarts?"

"If you had the job offers that man did you'd have to be crazy to turn them down," Neville says, "But then he's always been a little…" he trails off.

"He's a *genius* ," Hermione says, "Think of what he could teach us!"

"Doesn't do much teaching, does he?" Harry wrinkles his nose, "A bit of transfiguration, a bit of defence. Although I hear Dippet is meant to retire and he's a shoo-in for headmaster. Do you think he'll finally sack Snape?"

Ron stumbles over, soaking wet with Seamus and Dean, "Sack Snape? It's about time!"

"I heard they were moving Snape to teach Defence," Dean says, "And getting a new potions teacher."

Harry sighs, "We can only dream he'll sack Snape. So I guess Dumbledore's not teaching," Harry muses. "Maybe he *is* leaving?"

"Who're you talking about?" Ginny bounds up, flushed and freckled. She's grinning widely and easily as she flops down beside Luna.

"Dumbledore."

"He's back," she says, and she twists to Harry, reddening a little under

his gaze but continuing resolutely, “He asked to see you, actually. He says it’s urgent. It’s about Sirius.”

*

"You knew the Dark Lord."

It's not a question.

Tom Riddle finally takes the first stab at a topic that Albus is honestly impressed he has not broached before. But now - a split lip from something, a bruise on his arm that looks like he’s been tied up, but no explanations other than the way Hermione Granger watches him sharply at meal times - he finally lunges for a floating tether to pin down and chase.

Dumbledore busies himself with poking through a collection of boxes on his desk, “Gifts,” he says to Tom as if to explain why there are three boxes of Bertie Botts and a single lemon drop, “People forget I don’t like Bertie Bott’s Beans. Had a rather nasty experience with an earwax one once.” He cautiously offers one to Tom and, once declined, takes one for himself. He pulls a face. “Wood polish,” he hums.

Tom waits impatiently for his answer. Probably wondering if Dumbledore will ever give him his answers.

“I did know the Dark Lord,” Dumbledore says, eventually, when he can delay his response no further, “Once," he says, “I’ve seen many students pass through this school, Tom, is it any surprise I watched him pass through too?”

“What was he like?”

That is, in all the questions he could ask, not one Albus had anticipated. Tom’s eyes are hungry. Eager for knowledge, as always, but also a kind of desperation to *know* what kind of man tore his life apart before he was born.

Albus considers lying. For a heartbeat he considers twisting the truth into a horror story, into a warning, into a lesson to what monsters people could be.

Then his heart thumps again and the moment is lost. He is honest instead.

(Albus Dumbledore has always been honest to a fault and this is, somehow, more damning than the lies.)

“He was a boy. Much like you he attended this school. I taught his parents, and I'd gone to school with his grandparents. He was quiet, bright and he was brave. Brave and hopeful,” his smile of fond memories for the black-haired boy with knobbly knees and this calm, quiet assurance to him is tinged with sadness. And maybe if he hadn’t been a fool, maybe if he’d taken note of the glasses three sizes too small and taped together with sellotape, maybe if he’d thought to ask *why* Molly Weasley was so insistent the child stay with her for the summers--

Tom sits patiently, listening to him talk. Observing his responses in that detached, clinical manner of his.

Albus keeps talking. He owes the boy this much. “You must understand. I did not look at him then and know. I did not look at him and realise I had just met a wizard that would split our world - barely recovered from the previous war - back into factions. The man who would delve into dark arts and return unrecognisable.”

Would anything have changed, he thinks, if he had known?

“His father was an auror and his mother worked in the Department of Mysteries. They were brilliant and bright but they made a lot of enemies. One day one of those enemies followed them home."

“They were killed?”

“He grew up an orphan. A lot like you,” Dumbledore wants to reach out a gentle hand and rest it on the boy’s shoulder but he suspects the boy wouldn’t know what to do with the gesture. “I thought he had moved past their deaths - he had been so young when it happened - but the past has a way of never staying buried. He became obsessed with hunting their killer down. It consumed him.”

“Did he find their murderer?” Tom is eager to seek a resolution to this story. There are other questions buzzing in his eyes but Albus can only indulge so many memories today.

“Yes. And no. There were complications. His godfather had been mistakenly convicted. But even once this was ironed out… there was a fight. Grindelwald loyalists who refused to be caught after he fell. In the battle… his godfather was killed. A spell flung him straight through a veil in the Department of Mysteries. The Veil of Death.”

He remembers telling Harry they had Pettigrew in custody. That they were looking to clear Black's name.

He remembers hearing later that same day there had been an escape. And knowing that Harry wasn't in the castle. That he was at the Ministry testifying.

He had thought after defeating Grindelwald the fighting would be over. Yet he arrived at the ministry to spellfire illuminating the corridors near the courtrooms. To the shouts of aurors and the screams as the last of the fanatics go down in a blaze of glory. To the fleeing rat and chasing dog followed by the boy with Lily's fire and James' vindication twisted across those green eyes.

"You're dead the moment you touch the Veil," Albus explains, "I pulled him back before he could follow his godfather through, and yet I was too late. I fear he'd touched obsession."

*

Sirius falls. And Harry reaches for him and in doing so, a part of him falls too.

One moment Sirius Black is fighting with a laugh on his lips and a light in his eyes. The next moment a curse hits him square in the chest propelling him backwards. He doesn't even have a moment to realise what's happening.

Harry's quick on his feet. He always has been, reactions tuned to *danger* and *shiny gold* and he's already spinning, already diving for his godfather. The presence of the Veil does not register. Sirius is merely his destination and there is no obstacle in his way.

It's like diving into ice water. The first shock forces an exhale and then a sharp inhale, but it's so cold there is nothing to breathe in. His fingers curl, ice flaking off them as fast as it forms, and for a moment Harry can feel Sirius' wrist. Feel the fluttering of a warm pulse slowing. Can feel flesh under flesh and then--

He emerges from the icy lake to a searing arm around his waist and a beard tickling the back of his neck. The grip is strong for however old Dumbledore is. Strong and firm and he pulls Harry sharply away. Harry struggles, writhes and breaks free. Stumbles those few steps towards where Sirius had been.

Where Sirius was no longer.

The Veil flutters, a ragged curtain drifting in a breeze that doesn't exist. Through it Harry can see only the chamber beyond (can see cold shores and black rock and waves and *people* and--)

"Harry! Do *not* !" Dumbledore's tone is sharp. Commanding.

"Harry, no!" someone screams somewhere.

Sirius is gone. But he was there. He was - Harry had *felt him* . He had almost gotten a grip on him and then--

Then he was snatched away.

He whirls on Dumbledore like a snarling wolf, "I *had him* ," he snaps, "I could have saved him, *why didn't you let me save him* ?"

He does not know in that moment the picture he makes. A teenager who half-dived through a death door, hair wild with frost clinging to it. Skin pallid and bruised looking. And eyes almost silvery sheened over the vivid, killing curse green. He looks like a wild fae creature, slipped through the cracks. The air crackles around him and Dumbledore takes a step back, warily. Assessing.

Harry does not know this. Not now. Later he will understand, he will use this. But now all he knows is that his godfather - the only person who loved him unconditionally, the only person who was willing to give him a home - is dead. And Dumbledore stopped Hary from saving him. "I could have saved him," he says again, shoulders hunching, form smaller now, magic stilling as he settles.

But that wariness in Dumbledore's gaze does not fade, even as fury falls into grief in the boy before him. He reaches out but does not touch. Harry doesn't notice.

But then again, Harry also doesn't notice how the silvery sheen settles into the back of his eyes and doesn't melt with the frost that thaws from his dark hair.

*

(Dumbledore likes to blame the Veil for Harry's fall. Like it *corrupted him* . Like it *tainted* his magic.

And maybe it did, that slick-mercury tang on his tongue, the dark shadow of necrosis at his fingertips.

Or maybe, more terrifyingly, it didn't. He is Prometheus who has touched fire and despite the burn he is all the more fascinated by it. And so he dives in, heedless of the danger to himself, of the second, third-degree burns, of the choking smoke. This is a gift he dreams of sharing.

Time to wake up.

Harry spends the summer in pages of coded notes and heavy tomes. He is not smart enough to understand them yet but he will be. This is just the start.)

(Lily had a research post at the Department of Mysteries looking primarily into improved ways of magical transportation, and had taken a sharp left deviation into *planar* transportation with collusion into *death* transcendence and *time* travel.

A colleague working for Grindelwald told the Dark Lord about the potential to transport and hide whole armies, whole cities in a different world. Of sending your loyalists across the world in an instance without three international portkeys or apparating until your cells unravel. A friend of the Potter's was threatened and bribed into stealing it.

Sixteen years on: her son opens up her research notes.

This is just the start.)

*

Sitting in Dumbledore's office the air feels too warm. Too oppressive. Dumbledore has talked about the boy who would be the Dark Lord. The boy with a life oddly parallel to Tom's own. An orphan. Stronger, more powerful than his peers and with the drive to push further. Reach where others dared not, even when they reviled him for it.

Dumbledore has talked and spoken and yet still somehow he has said nothing.

"So why did he target my family?" Tom hates that he has to drag out every piece of information with a fish hook, "My mother?"

"The Gaunts," Dumbledore says, slowly, "Are an old family that go back to Slytherin himself. There are many potential reasons he would want to see the line ended."

That's not an answer.

Dumbledore must realise this, or maybe Tom pulls a face, for he inclines his head, "I have theories," he says, "Unconfirmed, but usually right, if I do say so myself. I believe he was looking for an artefact that was rumoured to be in the Gaunt line, handed down from father to son. Something to help him further his goals of dividing the wizarding world from the muggle one."

A new world , Harry tells him.

"What was the artefact? Did you find it?"

"Alas," Dumbledore sighs, stroking his beard, "I did not find anything. I arrived in the aftermath of whatever he was trying. Your uncle was unconscious a little ways away. Your mother was dead. And the Reaper was gone except for his wand. I summoned the healers straight away, and they were able to deliver you, screaming and protesting there on the scene. A graveyard with every single plant and animal inside dead. Drained of life."

"Do you know what it was? The artefact you think he was seeking?"

A slow shake of the head, "I can only hazard guesses, but at the end of the day I know no more than you do."

The words ring in the air, a tinny quality to them. A *lie* , Tom feels in his bones. He thinks of strange handwriting in a notebook in Professor Granger-Weasley's office. *Peverell ring* , he thinks, and he wonders, and he avoids Dumbledore's gaze.

There's a fluttering of wings and drifting down from a high window, a red dappled bird flutters over to him. It's the size and visage of a peacock, except its feathers are glittering red and gold. Its eyes are amber, its beak wicked curved and its tail feathers stream behind it.

It's a phoenix, Tom thinks in wonder as the bird lands on the arm of his chair. It croons. The noise is not unpleasant. It reminds him of an out of tune violin being plucked. Slowly, almost uncertain if he is even allowed, he reaches out to press the backs of his fingers against the bird's breast. It blinks slowly at him.

Dumbledore's smile is soft, "Fawkes seems to like you," he says.

Guy *Fawkes* . Tom wants to scoff at the name, but he keeps his face neutral. "He's lovely," he says, and the bird preens at his words. Those

red and gold feathers feel warm to touch, the faintest tingling there.

The headmaster peers at him over half-moon spectacles, “I gave Olivander two of his feathers to use in his craft,” he says, and it would seem like a strange tangent except, “He wrote to me when the first one was bought - yew and phoenix feather. I watched the boy who bought this wand walk through these halls. He was a child, once. And he made all the wrong choices. Now I watch you, with that same wand.”

Yew and phoenix. Poison and elixir. Death and panacea.

“I pray you make better choices than he did.”

*

It's not like Hermione doesn't realise it. It's not like it's a surprise. It’s not like it’s morally reprehensible to her. Killing people is bad, *she knows this* , but so is imbuing parchment with curses to permanently disfigure someone’s face. So is trapping a live human in a jar for two months.

A part of her has known since she and Ron had found him in sixth year. He’d been late back to the common room and the Map had been left lying out. He’d been obsessing over Malfoy of late - she’d yet to work out if it was a crush or some sort of bitter conviction that Lucius Malfoy was still working with Peter Pettigrew.

They found Harry on the third floor. Soaked to the bone, robes dripping water stained a muddy red. His gaze had been glassy. They’d repeated his name at least four times before he registered their presence. She remembers the horror in his words, his curled up, hunched shoulders, the *panic* that echoed in his voice.

But most of all she remembers the glint of steel in his gaze. The resolution and acceptance there.

No regrets.

He has that same look in his face now as she braces herself to tell him something she thinks he already knows. "They found Pettigrew," Hermione feels nervous. Harry blinks at her in confusion, as if he’s *confused* why she sounds worried. “The dementors got to him first, and then someone got to him after." Still silence. "He’s dead,” she adds, poking the hornet’s nest and waiting for the sting. Waiting for the reaction. Her tone wavers, uncertain when he just picks up an

apple and bites into it.

“I know,” he blinks, unbothered, “I ripped his heart out to make sure.”

She pales. She examines his gaze for some hint of a lie. But there is nothing, just a clean cold satisfaction with an underlying sense of unsettled guilt that stirs like a stormy sea. He did not like this. He did not enjoy it.

But he did it anyway.

Is Harry *evil* , she wonders. He murdered a man without pause. Ripped out his heart.

It sounds so childish when she says it out loud. Harry has never been cruel. He did not pull the wings off butterflies or skin rabbits. Harry had been *Good* .

This is a *choice* . This is what the world made him.

Harry Potter is a Dark Lord. He has murdered. He has killed. He will kill again.

That's wrong. That's vile. Those are reprehensible acts and yet--

And yet.

It's needed. Hermione has always been too clinical. Too logical in the face of facts. Emotions aside she is the perfect operating machine. People will die - fine - it's a necessary cost in the long run.

Pettigrew is, despite all things, not the first person Harry killed. He’s not even the second or third.

(You have to have known this. You have to have put the pieces together.)

(Tom Riddle asks Draco Malfoy how he died.)

murder

Tom Riddle asks Draco Malfoy how he died.

*

Can you imagine it?

You've just been told you're going to have a home. You're going to be adopted, essentially, and live with the brother your father once chose for himself.

The world seems like it's celebrating with you. The Dark Lord Grindelwald has fallen! His followers arrested! It's the best kind of chaos. You follow your godfather down the halls of the Ministry to testify and secure his freedom and your escape. And that's when you hear the first alarm ring.

(A Dark Lord has fallen. So now one must rise. Fate has flipped her coin and now Death must answer.)

*

“Harry! My dear boy,” Dumbledore gestures to the empty seat in his office, “How are you doing?”

How are you?

Everyone keeps asking Harry that and he wonders why. They don’t really want to hear the answer. They want to see him push a smile on his face and say ‘I’m fine’ in the tone of one who isn’t, but who will struggle through, and then they’ll pat him on the back in sympathy and consider their job done.

How do you tell people you’re not fine? How do you explain that you’re still trapped in that moment and it repeats in his head over and over? How do you describe the scene visible behind closed eyes and the chill he can still feel bone-deep? The whispers in his ears and the knowledge that if he had just reached that bit further--

Sirius is *dead* . A day ago he had been alive. Today his godfather is dead and it feels like he’s been orphaned all over again.

He forces a smile, “I’m fine,” he lies.

The time of anger and denial have passed. He's raged. He's had his fury. There is just quiet, cold frost now. "I am so sorry how events fell," Dumbledore says, "If I could have saved you this grief--"

Harry isn't here for platitudes, but he will play on them, "I was going to live with him," he says, "He had the papers finalised and everything. But now I'll have to go back to my aunt and she… My aunt's family don't like magic. She's never liked magic." His gaze flicks up to Dumbledore and he looks away, not wanting to see the answer before he's at least asked. "I was wondering if I'd be able to stay at Hogwarts over the summer. I can help out. I can be useful, I just need to do something and I know Pettigrew is still out there, I know staying with Ron or Hermione isn't safe but Hogwarts is meant to be secure, I just thought--"

He stops. He can see the answer in Dumbledore's eyes even though he doesn't want to read it.

"There is no place safer than your aunts'," Dumbledore says, gravely, "The wards your mother set up will protect you from any retaliation. I don't, of course, dictate where you spend your summers, but I'm afraid Hogwarts does not house students in July or August."

It's crushing. It's the candle of hope extinguished. Harry's jaw tenses. His eyes feel scratchy and he blinks fiercely. "It's just," he tries one more time, foolishly, hopelessly, "My aunt and uncle don't like magic. And I've had two incidents of accidental magic with them already, I don't want to be expelled or--" he stops because of the expression on Dumbledore's face.

"I had hoped," Dumbledore says, "I had hoped Petunia would overcome her feelings towards her sister to care for her son. But there are no wounds that run as deep as those caused by family." He shakes his head, slowly, "You were safe there. I know it did not seem like it, but you were always protected there, as Lily and James would have wanted. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark years, my boy," those twinkling blue eyes are sad, "But I had to ensure your safety."

It's like a knife in the gut. Harry sits there, heart thumping in his chest. His form lithe, bordering on starvation thin. He can feel his ribs like knives lining his chest. He can feel the remnants of bruises like kisses lining his vertebra.

Dumbledore *knew* . It stings. It's an open cantankerous wound and Harry had thought it had healed, thought he'd stitched it closed with

dental floss and stolen needles but now the old man has the audacity to tear it open.

His jaw clenches. He bites his tongue so hard he tastes blood.

"And you are here now. Alive, maybe not as happy or loved as I'd have hoped, but alive."

And Dumbledore reaches out to lay a hand on Harry's shoulder and he stands, suddenly, moving out of the touch before it lands. The movement falters. Harry knows his gaze is too sharp, green eyes with a sheen of tears he no longer knows how to shed.

His childhood trained him too well. Crying gets you nowhere.

He wants that righteous fury that has always served him so well. He wants that hot flare of anger, blood-deep, but all Harry feels is chilled. “I won’t risk my friends,” he says, “But if Pettigrew was to be found… captured…”

“The possibilities,” Dumbledore acknowledges, but his gaze is sharp, “But do not put yourself at risk, Harry. You are fifteen. You are still in school. Do not risk yourself or your friends.”

There’s a moment Harry thinks Dumbledore sees right through him. Sees the hollow bone-filled thing Harry has become. But then that second is over and Harry’s smiling, his shoulders relax, he lifts his chin and he’s the plucky young Gryffindor again, “I won’t put anyone in danger because of me,” he promises.

*

Harry has always been prone to his obsessions. They are not always accurate or healthy. The utter conviction he had that Snape was trying to kill him during his first year only to find out the man had been trying to pay off a life debt to his father. The determination to hunt down Sirius Black in his third year and bring him to justice. The resolution with which he had launched himself into the Defence Association in his fifth year with the war looming on the horizon and Grindelwald finally threatening the shores of Britain.

Peter Pettigrew is still out there. A rat hiding in the sewers. He could be anywhere.

There are ways to track people. Blood magic and scrying spells. Harry has found the books in the Restricted Section, his pass from Remus

well and truly abused.

The magic is all illegal. He can't even figure out why.

Some blood, some human body parts, some time sensitive spells - it's nothing more complicated than some potion recipes. But the *potential* made people afraid, and scared people hate what they don't understand and so now he's here, reading in a twist of the library that's away from the usual foot traffic.

(In the future it will be the same corner Tom frequents. Back to a wall, multiple exit routes - if either had stopped to think on it, old habits are hard to break.)

He cross-references some scrawlings in his potions book with a different textbook. He's not sure who took to vandalising their school textbook with several genius potions alterations. He's not sure who left spell creation in the margins of a sixth year textbook.

Sectum. Latin. *To cut . To severe .*

Sempra. From *semper.* Continuously.

To cut continuously.

Harry had not had much interest in spell creation prior to his sixth year. In fact he hadn't really had much of an interest in any of his studies other than Defence prior to his sixth year. He'd always been too busy *having friends* and playing Quidditch and exploring his talent in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Then his godfather dies. Then Harry's fingers skim over death. Then Dumbledore pats him on the back with condolences and sends him back to the muggles. To the cold world lifeless without magic. To grieve alone and trapped and with his relatives who do their best impression of pretending he doesn't exist.

He digs into the pile of textbooks and pulls one out about spells and language. The etymology of spells and why spells are mostly written in dead languages. Aramaic and Ancient Greek and Latin and Sanskrit. The loss of meanings because the words no longer exist. The way transfiguration uses the *language* difference to facilitate the transformative properties of--

"I knew you were *cheating* ."

Draco Malfoy's nasally tone interrupts him. Harry hadn't even noticed him appearing but now the pointed-faced boy stands next to the desk. He's scooped up Harry's textbook and is rifling through it.

"Give that back," Harry snaps, setting down his quill.

"Who is the 'Half-Blood Prince' anyway? Your boyfriend?" Malfoy sneers, bending the book too far, making the cover *creak* .

"No," Harry bristles, "It's just an old book. Give it back."

"I *knew* there was no way *you* could get that good at potions that quickly," Malfoy is filled with a vindictiveness at being proven right. He takes a step backwards, baiting Harry into a fight.

Harry's fists clench. His temper flares. "You're not the best anyway," he says, "Hermione is. Must *gall* you. A *mudblood* better than you." The curse word slides off his tongue. Hermione would flay him for saying it. But right now he's dragging Malfoy down into the dirt with him. Let them all be equal for once.

And indeed Malfoy's nostrils flare, he lets out a small 'humph' in the tone of one who can't quite come up with a comeback. "You know," he says, slamming the potions book shuts, "Some fancy little spells in here. I think I might keep it," he makes an exaggerated show of opening his fancy leather satchel and dropping it in with deliberateness. His smile is smug. His pointy face is twisted in cruel, childish glee at Harry's shattered expression, "Let's see how good you are at potions now."

The anger burns, but it's not the hot flash of temper he's used to. It's cold and bright. Like a comet passing across the night sky. "Going to hand it over to Snape like a good little prefect? Or your father - oh *wait* --is he still busy with the enquiries? Trying to avoid Azkaban?" Malfoy flinches a little at something he sees when he looks at Harry.

"Don't worry, Potter. I won't *rat* you out."

The burning comet of anger shatters, just a little, like iron rain falling down. Malfoy vanishes.

The silver in Harry's eyes doesn't.

*

Tom asks the question on an insignificant day at the end of his fourth

year. He's on his way down to the Chamber. He slips the invisibility cloak from his shoulders. The bathroom had been empty when he did so.

The voice appears the moment he becomes visible. "That's a rather fancy artefact for a mudblood."

"Half-blood," his ire is raised already, "Are you here all the time? I thought you were free to roam?"

"And deal with all the other students?" the ghost form of Draco Malfoy shifts into view from where he had been half in and half out of the wall - the reason Tom hadn't spotted him. Ghosts don't sleep. They fade - similar to the way Harry does, slipping out of reach between heart beats and back with a blink. They appear to sleep, and Tom's walked past the Gryffindor ghost snoring once. But they don't *need* rest.

"So you *choose* to haunt a girl's toilet?" Tom drawls. He doesn't intend the words to be anything other than an observation but they come out cruel.

The ghost doesn't notice, "How did a penniless orphan get an *invisibility* cloak. Those are rare. Expensive."

"A gift. From a friend," Tom uses the same lie he used for Granger-Weasley. "Now I have places to be, and I need to speak parseltongue - if you'll excuse me--"

"Trust a mudblood to have an invisibility cloak. First poor little orphan Potter, now a Slytherin heir with *muggle* blood. A disgrace. My father would be disgusted if he was still on the board of governors. This school has gone to the dogs."

He's still talking when the words hit. Tom's half turned away and now he pauses, half-listening to the poncy pureblood ghost ranting, and half *wondering* .

He turns. "Potter?" he asks, " *Harry Potter?* "

The ghost doesn't notice his pause, " *Yes* . *Potter* . Always sneaking around, thinking he was *better* than us. *Saint* Potter. Golden-boy Potter. He could do no wrong, even when he did."

There's something in the way he says it. A bitterness, a *knowing* . For a moment the dead boy is not a ghost trapped in motions and echoes,

but a sharper reflection of the young man he was before he died.

“What do you mean?” Tom asks, tone light, “I heard he was popular. Quidditch Captain, star Gryffindor.”

A hollow laugh from Malfoy, “He was a sanctimonious prick.” Crass words from a pureblood, “And when it came down to it…” Malfoy spreads out his arms, “The higher they fly to the sun, the further they fall.” Bitterness turned rancid. And another emotion. *Respect.* Or something akin to it, beaten into leaf-thin sheet metal.

Tom Riddle does not care about other people. Superficial interest, often faked, and respectful social courtesies aside he simply does not care. But there’s something in the way Malfoy speaks that makes him enquire further for possibly the first time in his life.

Tom Riddle asks Draco Malfoy how he died.

*

Harry is not sure, in hindsight, who threw the first spell.

Looking back he is not even sure how they ended up here, really - but does it matter? Their schoolyard rivalry and squabbles had all but been actively encouraged by the staff. This feels the same as always, right up until it doesn’t.

Draco Malfoy lies dying on the floor. Harry can’t breathe. He feels like time has slowed around to him, each second drawn out to its agonising length. Malfoy breathes and it sounds like a rusted saw, tines catching on stone with each ragged gasp for air. An almost sob, a whimper of some pitiful animal dying in the dark.

There’s a broken sink. A thin sheen of water over the bathroom floor. A shattered cistern is spraying a fine mist that fogs some of the mirrors. Water pools over the floor and his footsteps are wet, gasping things as he steps forwards. The sheen of water across the floor refracts light over the ceiling.

The stone around Malfoy is pooling rust. Like iron broken down by the air and water and then torn to pieces it leaks out. The smell is sharp. Bitter. Draco’s chest shudders. His white shirt is not so white anymore. His blue eyes are wide and terrified. Harry can see the pulse in his neck fluttering like a moth beneath his skin.

Sectum. Latin. *To cut . To severe .*

Sempra. From *semper. Continuously*.

Sectumsempra. To cut continuously. *For enemies* .

It was clumsily put together, Harry had thought when he first found the spell. Latin conjoined like some deformed twin that should have died in the womb.

And yet, he thinks as he looks at the body, it was oh so effective.

Sectumsempra . To cut continuously.

Spells are ungainly, Harry thinks.

Crucio . To crucify. To torture.

The *crucio* shatters his shield. He's forced to spin out of the way of the rust-brown curse, throwing an array of his own jinxes in retaliation. He's bleeding himself. A *diffindo* he'd dodged only to have bounce off a mirror sliced open his shoulder. Half their spells had rebounded off the mirrors. Some had hit.

(Maybe this had just been a rebounded spell.)

There's no wand movement for *Sectumsempra* . Just the intention. The plan. For enemies.

Harry had always been uncannily good at offensive magic.

Harry breathes out slowly. His breath fogs in the air. He's cold. He's *so so cold* and he tastes frost on the air. He wonders if he reaches forwards and presses cold fingertips to that racing pulse if he'll find warmth or just more icy fingers reaching from a realm beyond to grab him and pull him in and--

Draco Malfoy is dying, he realises, thoughts stuttered and delayed. Blood pools from cuts upon cuts that have torn open over his body and now he bleeds. Harry has heard the term 'death from a thousand cuts' and he never thought he'd see it. Never thought--

They teach so many spells in this school. Fancy plants and creatures. How to turn a cat into a teapot. How to make things fly and spin and dance and change colour. How to calculate numbers and the future and write in a long dead language. Healing, he thinks, should be on the curriculum.

His breathing is picking up. Not quite to the gasping death knell of

Malfoy, but panic is beginning to set in. " *Episkey* ," he says, pressing the tip of his wand against a bleeding cut in Malfoy's shoulders. He meets pale eyes, sees the fear in them as Harry tries to stitch him back together with duct tape and safety pins, sees the realisation they both have that a minor charm used for broken noses and paper cuts is not going to work here.

He tries again anyway. Over and over.

(He knows futility when he sees it. He has been intimate with death since the cradle, he knows what comes next. And he knows the punishment. He knows the sentence that will fall upon his head and *he can't have that, this is his home, if they kick him out will they make him go back there--)*

(It's not even a question, not really. Dumbledore knew all these years… why would this change things?

Recklessness is just self-preservation twisting the fight or flight response. Harry's always been good at rash decisions.)

Madness is repeating the same plan, bound to fail.

Madness is forcing every healing spell he knows so they're the only recorded spells when Snape and Dumbledore check, later.

Madness is picking up Malfoy's wand, slick with blood staining the sand-coloured wood and casting just one spell with it. A purple flash of light and the sink is already broken. A few more chips go flying. *Sectumsempra* cannot cut ceramic, it appears, as he drops the wand back next to Malfoy's still gasping body.

Then he takes a deep breath, opens his mouth and screams for help.

*

Harry is cold. People crowd him and it's like the world is muffled. Even Dumbledore - normally soft and gentle - has a hard edge to him. His eyes are like chips of ice and his words are harsh. Snape's a fire - raging fury shouting and snapping out.

And Harry is just numb. Everything slides off him. He repeats what happened. Each time he does his voice wavers further. The words are ice chips on his tongue. Are they lies? He's not sure. He genuinely doesn't know.

His last spells were healing spells and shield charms. Malfoy's last spells include amongst them the cutting curse that killed him and an unforgivable.

Harry's mind skitter-slides between panic and guilt and horror and he lets it, lending a desperation to his tone, "I didn't… I don't know what happened… We were fighting." He sucks in air, shaking. Adrenaline slinks away leaving him bereft and empty. He's cold, robes soaked, blood staining them from where he had tried to heal the open cuts. "He tried to *crucio* me--" he chokes out, "One of his spells hit a mirror. It rebounded. It hit him and then he was *just lying there* --" he can see the still form in his mind. Can see the gasp for air even as his life bled from him.

He meets Dumbledore's blue gaze. Harry is not good enough at the mind arts to feel the sticky slide of his mental fingers through his mind, but the only images in his thoughts are that of the dying form of the Slytherin boy, spells flying, the *crucio* whirling past him --

Dumbledore breaks their eye contact. Harry's still shaking. His throat feels thick. In the background Madam Pomprey and Severus Snape are so *so* still.

Crucio. *To crucify* . Their gazes crucify him in that moment, condemning him with their judgement.

He'll be expelled, he thinks, and then they'll send him back to the Dursley's with shards of a broken wand and his life will be over. Despair and guilt threaten to choke him and he shudders out a shaky breath. He's still bleeding from shards of a broken mirror and rebounded spells.

The adults are whispering. *We can't* , they whisper, *self-defence* , Harry hears and he numbs himself to their conversation. His neck feels vulnerable, open and exposed on the chopping block before the fall of the sword.

"Go clean yourself up, Harry," Dumbledore steps into view. "Then come to my office."

He meets those blue eyes. They're not twinkling. They're just sad.

"Am I being expelled?" he asks, dully, "Should I bring my stuff?"

"You're not being expelled," Dumbledore says, ignoring Snape's furious snarl behind him. The words register, even if the emotion

doesn't hit. Harry's still riding the edge of a knife blade, waiting for the guillotine to sever his head. "But I'm going to need a statement. And you will serve detention. But it wasn't your fault. It was an accident."

An accident.

An *accident?*

"Run along now," Dumbledore says. Harry's feet move automatically. An accident. That's it? He just kills another student and they brush it aside?

He killed--

He feels sick.

No, he thinks, it was an accident. It was--

He makes it around the corner before he's throwing up. He killed--

He can't think it. He can't--

He--

He's already thrown up everything in his stomach but it gives another lurch. He vanishes the vomit and straightens. His robes are still damp. He can still smell blood.

It was self-defence, he reasons. If he hadn't he'd be the one on the floor screaming. If he hadn't--

He *murdered* --

No. He did what he had to. He *survived* . He *defended* himself.

Harry won. Draco lost. It was that simple, right?

Right?

Ron and Hermione find him curled up in one of the secret passages in sodden, bloodstained robes with silent sobs. He refuses to tell them why. It doesn't matter. The news of Draco Malfoy's death is all over the school the next day anyway.

*

Hermione resigns a year into her posting. The curse will not let her stay longer. She can almost feel it eating at her tenure, saliva dripping as it bites at her heels.

(She can't feel it of course, not really. She does not have the magic sensitivity Harry always seemed to. She does not have Ron's knack for dealing with enchanted objects or Neville's gifts with plants. She doesn't have any particular magical ability. She's muggleborn.

She is, however, fresh magical blood. An attempt to keep magic breathing. A cry for help. She's pure untapped potential.

That's somehow better at the end of the day.)

She leaves the books in the library and has a polite resignation meeting with Dumbledore. He keeps her at arms lengths but he has a warmth for her that had long faded in interaction with Harry or Ron. Like a part of him wants to believe she will come to her senses.

She thinks of the boy.

He's vicious. Wickedly smart and a sheen of politeness over venom filled fangs. She thinks of the fury she saw in his eyes as he clutched Harry's wand and looked at them with the promise of murder.

And she thinks of the way her neck had prickled, the feeling of eyes on her, and the way Riddle had paused and then lowered his wand. Not in the way someone does when changing their mind, but in reaction to something Hermione can only guess at.

Mors vincit omnia. Death always wins, she hears Harry say, before he launches into battle. To hear those words fall from Riddle's mouth, Harry's wand in his hand, Harry's cloak in his possession and his body twisting into Harry's preferred duelling stance...

He is not Harry. His eyes do not sheen silver, he does not smile with the hint of a laugh and his brown eyes do not hold any warmth for her.

But then *how* ...

Death always wins. The acceptance of the inevitability. Of accepting the end. The only god Harry would ever serve. And he was dead, surely, the Reaper had been reaped, the Resurrection stone ripping him from this world and into the next. That had been what she and Ron had always concluded. The message they had passed to the

others. The inevitable conclusion from Dumbledore's triumphant proclamation and the utter *lack* of news from their leader.

Maybe he's watching from the next life, she thinks, gaze coming to rest on Harry's notes as she clears out her office. Loose leaves that had been torn out and shoved back in, pages folded together. She nudges the corner of one, twisting the words into the light. Then she pulls another one loose. She thinks of the idea of walking through the Veil and ending up somewhere else, the very soul of the idea that had spurred their cause.

All the worlds layered over each other. Never touching. A mere breath away. She curls the paper up.

Different worlds, she thinks, and lets the page drop. A different *plane* .

*

"I asked Draco Malfoy how he died."

Harry is not storms and blizzards at this moment. He is soft; touches fluttering over his skin like the flutter of a moth's wings: the faintest of impressions against Tom's skin. He is not afraid. He has seen Tom's worst already. Tom doubts he even cares about the judgement of a fifteen year old boy, but he gives it anyway.

"What did he say?"

"He told me what happened. I *knew* it," there is a fever in his gaze.

"Knew *what* ?"

"Isn't it obvious? We're the same. We're both murderers."

Equals .

Harry's laugh echoes through Hogwarts' corridors.

equals

Harry Potter is a murderer.

They don't call him that to his face. They don't name him at all in the newspaper articles (but that's because Hermione's got a bug in a jar and Harry has Sirius' inheritance as bribery). There is no published account of what happened. The announcement happens at dinner. The house banners are black. Malfoy is missing from the Slytherin table and Harry Potter has a nasty cut on his jaw and bruises and grazes that weren't there a few days ago. He's also got several months worth of detentions and suspension from the Quidditch team. People have seen him holed up in McGonnagal's office after classes.

(Dumbledore wouldn't look him in the eye when he announced Harry's punishment, let alone volunteer to host his detentions himself.)

Harry Potter killed a boy, and he feels bad but… not that bad. He had felt terrible. The shock and guilt had clung to him like the last vestige of winter initially and then it just... didn't. He does not dream of Malfoy's body the way he dreams of Sirius falling through the Veil. He does not feel churning guilt when he thinks of Malfoy's fate.

He remembers the coolness of the magic as it fell from his wand, the stillness of death and the heat of life even as it bled away.

Hermione looks uneasy when she sits down next to him at dinner. Harry wonders why. Has Skeeter escaped the jar?

She has her lips pressed together and her whole body is tense, as if she's bracing herself. She takes a deep breath in through her nose and stills a bit when Ron drops into a seat next to Harry. She's readying herself to say something when someone beats her to it.

"Hey! Potter! Is it true you were duelling Malfoy when he died?"

Harry twists to look at Pansy Parkinson. Tear-reddened eyes narrowed spitefully at him and flanked by the gorillas that are Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, "Why'd you say that?" he asks. Deny deny deny. They'll call him a liar anyway, why give them any more material to use against him?

And the pug-faced Slytherin girl's eyes light up at that, at knowing

something he doesn't, "Didn't you hear?" she practically crows in his face.

"Harry--" Hermione whispers, "Don't--"

"Oh Potter, you should head up to the second floor," Parkinson speaks over Hermione, "Hogwarts has just gained a new ghost. So for how I know? Dearest Draco told me himself."

Oh.

*

The rumours fly.

They always do - Hogwarts' rumour mills are vicious.

It's messy. People twist to stare at Harry. A *fight* they murmur, *Potter killed him.*

No, that's not right, he's Harry Potter, he wouldn't--

Why haven't they expelled him?

Malfoy was using dark magic. It backfired.

Lies.

No, it's true. My dad's an auror, they checked his wand.

Malfoy confirmed it.

Malfoy what?

Didn't you hear? Malfoy is--

"A *ghost*?" Harry asks the translucent form lingering by a window on the second floor, "*You're* a ghost?"

"Always so judgemental," Malfoy drawls. "That's one of the most annoying things about you - you judge *everyone*. From the moment I met you and you decided you were better than me. Me?! A Malfoy. You should be grateful I was even talking to you!"

"You were a bully," Harry says, tone soft, "I don't like bullies."

"What do you *want*, Potter?" his sneer as a ghost is just as effective as

it was in life, which is to say it just succeeds in making his face look pointier, “Of all the people I want to talk to, Potter, you are not one of them. What do you want?”

Draco Malfoy as a ghost is almost more annoying than he ever was in life.

“The whole school is whispering,” Harry says, casually, “About our duel. About what happened.”

A beat. And for a moment Harry is convinced Draco knows. For a moment he meets the fog-white glaze of those eyes and he thinks the spirit remembers what happened, remembers what spells fell from his wands and what spells didn’t--

A blink and the moment is gone. Draco shrugs. Lucius Malfoy would tell him off for such a plebian action.“Yeah yeah, shouldn’t have tried to *Crucio* you. You deserved it. Acting like you always know better, like you're *perfect Potter*. Guess I shouldn’t cast spells I’ve not tried out,” he’s bitter, “But to think it could have been you, here.”

“Why?” Harry asks, to make sure, to confirm (is he safe, does Malfoy know, but no, a ghost is a denial of death and to deny his death is to deny Harry was the one that killed him, Draco will not allow Harry that final victory, he can’t, he became a ghost to deny it, school yard pettiness at its finest…)

“Why what?” Malfoy says, snootily.

Malfoy *doesn’t know*.

Relief is a palpable, physical thing that sinks into Harry’s bones. It tastes like victory.

It tastes like freedom.

It’s eerie, he thinks, in the aftermath of the relief, finally able to examine Malfoy properly. Seeing him as a ghost when he had known him alive is a strange experience. Form and features so familiar but transparent and the background imposing itself through him, as if trying hard to remind you of Malfoy’s impermanence..

Harry reaches out for Malfoy’s wrist, and his fingers brush something tangible. And Malfoy *flinches* back, looking alarmed. Looking scared. You’re not meant to be able to touch a ghost and yet--

(And Harry's eyes have that mercury silver sheen, brushed with belladonna, Draco thinks, staring at the boy who killed him. And, for the first time since he discovered he was dead and a ghost and he'd live forever, now… for the first time he is reminded of the sensation of fear.)

Harry's fingers are cold and he feels like reaching through a tear in the world, through a curtain with voices whispering and he can almost imagine why Draco shied away from that, "I want to know about dying," he says, "I want to know about ghosts."

*

Harry has always been told his parents were smart. Lily Evans was the brightest witch of her generation. James Potter was talented in transfiguration, smart enough to not only achieve an animagus transformation at fifteen but to coax two of his friends through the process as well.

Harry had never had an interest in school. It had been a battleground in his childhood - a constant war zone of avoiding Dudley, of keeping his head down, of getting grades good enough to avoid suspicion from teachers but not good enough to threaten Dudley. Of being just settled enough the teachers smile at him blandly and their gazes skim over him, but not enough in the background that they have to squint too closely and notice the baggy clothes, the thin wrists and the occasional bruise.

(And let's be honest here - the Dursley's do not intentionally mistreat their nephew - he is not beaten, they do not break his bones or starve him - not all the time anyway. He is fed and clothed and alive at eleven to attend the school of his parents. Preferential treatment to their own rather coddled son is just a personality flaw.)

(But let's also acknowledge that neglect is still a form of abuse. Hogwarts is an escape. School should not be considered an escape for a happy child.)

Harry is not the only abused child. He is not the worst treated child to walk Hogwarts walls. It is not only his sanctuary.

A school should not be a sanctuary from the world. The world should not require protecting from. The world should not be seen as chains and shackles.

Harry is going to free them. He is going to give them the escape that

Dumbledore never offered him.

Ideas and revolutions are not born overnight. They are grown and cultured over years. Harry is charming. For his first five years at school he is everybody's friend. Popular, funny, good at sports - he ticks all the boxes.

For his last two years he refines it. Turns it into a weapon. Draws in the lost muggleborns still struggling to find their place. Breaks the purebloods down from aristocrats in gilded hallways to people who understand what power they hold.

(Dumbledore watches him with jaded eyes as Harry gathers people around him and starts talking about security and sanctuary and magical innovation and progress and Dumbledore worries.)

He thinks, sometimes, that Ron and Hermione know. He has not spoken to them about his plans. Hermione thinks he has an unhealthy obsession with death and is trying to find a way to bring Sirius back. Ron realises that it's more than that - an offshoot idea that has yet to bloom - but he's not quite figured out what. Neville, of all people, probably knows the most; from late night conversations about Wizengamot policies and laws.

Harry does not need to be there himself. He's pretty sure the old crowd would laugh if he - barely of majority - walked in and demanded the Black and Potter seats. They are old money - aristocracy trying to run a world that is constructed on the burned out frame of a dying system. They do not value magic and skill - they value influence and pedigree.

He asks Dumbledore once for the Defence post.

He does not ask again.

He has a plan. It is said to be impossible but Harry has always liked challenges. Armed with the foundation of research his mother never got to explore and memories of a tear in the fabric of reality he plans to follow in Lily Potter's footsteps.

"My name is Harry Potter. I have an interview?"

The Unspeakable looks harried. He won't meet Harry's gaze. He fumbles for papers and drops more than he keeps clenched between his hands. "I'm afraid," he says, solemnly, "There's been a mistake."

It doesn't register at first, "What do you mean?" Harry asks.

"This interview for the position. It's not open."

"What do you mean it's not open?" Harry says, "It was when I applied!"

"Clerical error," the man brushes him off. "We no longer need any new recruits. We're all full."

"Full?" Harry spins around at the empty hall, "Who? Who else? I'm the best qualified you'll have! Four outstandings. Two letters of recommendations! Sports, extracurriculars, grades - what else do you want?" He'd worked himself to the bone for those grades. He'd spent more time in the library than Hermione.

The Unspeakable still looks uncomfortable. There's something he's not saying. He gestures limply to the door, "If you can see yourself out, please, Mr Potter--"

Harry is left hollow and bereft. 'No' is a solid wall that he can't overcome. The Unspeakable tries to look busy so he doesn't have to watch Harry's defeated retreat. It's for this reason the Unspeakable also doesn't notice when Harry stops, one of the fallen pieces of paper catching his attention.

He recognises his name.

He snatches it up, gaze skimming the parchment. It's one of his reference letters from Hogwarts. Except--

…strong leader…potential…

…I must caution… an incident four years ago where he came into contact with the Veil…

…fully reviewed by healers following…I must caution you…

…signs of impulsivity, temper…

…reckless engagement with his life and others…

The signature at the bottom loops and twists. It is not… not wrong. It's phrased as a letter of concern. It gently nudges away from research and towards more active ministry roles in the aurors or the obliviator squad. It does not outright tell them not to hire him. In fact it flatters his skills and professes his talent. *He'll be an asset,* it claims. It gives

them the information and lets them decide. It does not hold his hand.

Except it does. The signature alone is enough.

The paper crumples in his hand, tearing. He's not even angry.

No, that's a lie. He's *furious*. But once his temper had been a bright, flaring phoenix like that which cored his wand. But now it's something softer. Dim embers. Or maybe it's cold creeping frost settling its way along the branches of the cool yew, maybe it always has been the onset of winter. Cold. Bitter. And unforgiving.

Nobody's watching him leave.

Nobody is watching as he takes a slight detour on his way out.

*

("What if we could separate," Harry says once, "Completely separate the way they said Avalon once was. Live in the same space but a different fold of it. Right next to the muggles and they'd never even know we were here. Not even if you touched. Like pages of a book."

Ron looks intrigued. Hermione is frowning, "And muggleborns?" she asks, "Can they come and go?"

"At first," Harry shrugs, "Just like you can visit family in America, you can step across the fold. We can review."

He has no wish to kidnap children away like changelings. That will not win him the muggleborns. But if it's successful, if the split between muggles and magicals *works*...

They'll review.

When he makes no move to push this Hermione relaxes, gets that little squint to her expression that suggests she is starting to contemplate how something like this would be done. Her mind races behind bushy curls.

The world hangs adults for their incompetence, Harry thinks, but the truth is everyone is failing upwards. The only difference between the youth and the older generation is that they still dare to dream.

And Harry doesn't just dream. Harry *aspires*.)

*

There are cracks in the Ministry.

When Hermione asks Harry what he was thinking later this is the truth.

He wasn't thinking.

It was base instinct at its finest. His shadow crawling under flesh and sinew and acting for him.

Hermione believes him because she's sometimes too trusting of her friends.

Rom doesn't because Ron knows him, has seen his obsession, his fury, his recklessness at its finest. Ron looks at Harry and knows that he's lying as he tried to explain why he tore apart the Ministry.

It wasn't premeditated. It wasn't planned. He doesn't think it through at all.

In the aftermath he has only one thought.

He's going to tear it all down.

The first crack is an accident. He’s angry.

It sinks into his veins like winter - harsh, unwelcome and unrelenting.

Harry leaves the Department of Mysteries with his pulse pounding. His breath frosts in the air and all he knows is this cold, insidious anger. He’s on his way out, one cancelled job interview and a burning desire to *destroy*.

He did not get the joys of destroying Dumbledore’s office in this world. He was still too cold, too chilled from the touch of the Veil, too lost in the frozen lake of his grief. But now the ice cracks.

Splinters.

They should have better security, Harry thinks, as he detours on his way out. There are rooms with prophecies and time turners and artefacts nobody understands. There are rooms filled with brains and plants growing out of hearts and half-grown human foetuses.

There is one room with a rocky outcrop and a stone archway. It’s simple columns and an arch. There are no fancy runes or words. It’s just a doorway. Two red curtains drift in the doorway, the colour

bleeding to grey near the bottom.

There are voices whispering through the veil. When he looks through he sees the other side of the chamber.

When he looks through he sees rocky shores and ice and trees made of bone and there are shapes and--

His mind slides sideways, unable to comprehend the world through the tear. It is behind that which the human mind can understand. He reaches out with trailing fingers, feeling the cold, the ice, the bone deep *pain*--

A part of him wonders what it would be like if he steps through it. If he'll feel the hundreds of needles piercing his flesh shell, stitching bone shards into his skin and leaving shrapnel wrapped around his heart like wrapping paper. If he'll breathe bramble thorns and blink broken oyster shells from his eyes.

The moment seems to last forever. He stands there, the world still. It lasts forever. It lasts half a second.

He draws back.

And then he draws his yew wand and fires an *expulso* at the archway.

The Ministry is built deep. They did not move the arch here, no, they built the arch around the tear. To contain it. To mark it. A buried place of worship.

The Ministry is built here for a reason. Levels below the surface, wrapped around this strange phenomenon. The Ministry is built deep.

And then Harry fires an exploding curse at one of its foundations and the Ministry?

The Ministry *cracks*.

*

The whole Ministry shakes. The whole Ministry shatters.

wraith

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“She’s *awful* , isn’t she?”

Harry is back to irritating Tom during Defence class. Tom’s gaze drifts over to where Harry is perched in his usual spot by the stairs. Out of all Tom’s classes he favours Defence - he had once wanted to teach it, so Tom understands his curiosity at watching their revolving door of teachers pass through. He’s never once stalked Tom to his Divination class or Arithmancy.

“She’s a… *choice* ,” Nott unknowingly reflects Harry’s words, leaning in close to Tom to mutter in his ear, “She’s Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. More entrenched in *politics* than teaching.”

Tom eyes up the scene of pink that is their Defence classroom for his fifth year. Gone are Granger’s Defence and Duelling posters, and informatics on duelling stances. Instead there are pictures that look like something you’d find on the wall of a five year old schoolyard. Children sitting at desks and reading books. A round-faced chubby child in various wand poses, none of which are something Tom has ever learned before.

Their teacher herself resembles a human toad. Short, squat, short curls and dressed all in pink.

Tom thinks he throws up a little in his mouth.

“Why is she *here* then?” he asks Nott.

Avery pipes in, “Father says the Ministry wants more influence in Magical Education.”

“Heard there were complaints about a mu--” Nott’s gaze darts to Tom and he changes his word choice early, “Having a muggleborn teaching such an important OWL subject.”

“Complaints about a *muggleborn* teaching, but no issues about the fact Granger used to support *Him* ,” Avery rolls his eyes. “It’s like the Ministry are trying to forget we were having a civil war two decades ago.”

Nott hits Avery with his textbook. Tom thinks that's probably the best use of the book. His own copy is currently being used as a doorstop somewhere. "So why send her?"

"She's Fudge's shadow. Heard she's a little…obsessed…" Avery pulls a face.

Tom and Nott stare at him for a moment before they both look away in disgust. Nott hits Avery again with his textbook.

There's a high-pitched squeak from the front of the room. It takes Tom a moment to realise that it's their teacher. Dolores Umbridge pitches her voice at least an octave higher than it should be and it comes off dripping in falsities. "Mr Nott, do try and pay attention."

"To the textbook?" Nott asks, a bit dumbly.

"Have you read chapter three yet?"

"Yes, Professor," Nott says, "We were just talking about Slinkhard's theory on right-handed duelling styles versus left-handed wand positions--"

"Ah, yes," Umbridge sniffs, "Right is preferable, of course, but we can make allowances for lesser wizards."

" *Vile* ," Harry hisses, making Tom start slightly with the force of it, "The Ministry are sending their *dogs* to try and control Hogwarts. They don't control it, not really. The board of governors is there but they don't do anything. Children *die* and they don't do anything--"

Tom meets his gaze. Harry's lips quirk. *You killed him* , Tom thinks. Harry killed a boy and got away with it. Incompetence at its finest.

"There's a new bill," Avery says, pitching his voice low, "That's another reason my father thinks she's here. It will have a direct impact on Hogwarts. Father isn't... he's not happy with it, but it's not... the Minister is lobbying for it. So is Umbridge as Undersecretary." Tom wishes that despite how useful Avery's father is for knowing this he shouldn't, that his son would not regurgitate all of the beliefs he has been taught.

"Why doesn't your father like it?" he presses.

Avery looks blank-faced for a moment, asif the very idea had never occurred to him, "Well we're making them a problem," he says, after a

moment of thinking very hard, “We’re addressing them as an issue while they could just be ignored. But instead we’re *registering* them. Like they’re something special.”

Tom has, peripherally, heard of the Muggleborn Registration Act. It had been proposed over a decade ago: a registry of all children with muggle parents who demonstrate accidental magic. Word was the Reaper opposed it and those who were in support turned up dead. He's unsure how much is hearsay and how much is truth.

“I don’t see why we need it,” Nott leans forward to join the conversation. “A list of muggleborn children? For what?”

“I think,” Harry hums to Tom, “The Ministry need to take a look at what happened the last time people made a list of a minority group.”

“What *do* they intend to do with this list?” Tom asks, still looking at Harry but tilting his head towards Avery.

“Uhhh,” Avery sits there and mimics an idiot for a few moments, mouth open, blinking gormlessly, “I think there was talk of bringing in muggleborn students in earlier… but also of registering their locations to track underage magic to maintain the Statute.”

“Today it’s a list,” Harry stretches. Like a cat. “Tomorrow it’s a register. Then it’s a permit. It’s another way to control people.” He stands. He’s around Tom’s age today, but the scars from when he’s older have bled through. That nasty slice over his throat. The skin around his neck and jaw is covered with fine, silver scars. The angle some of them sit look almost like fingers, if fingers were razor lined.

Tom makes some idle notes. There are ink stains on his fingers. “Surely picking out the children from the muggle world earlier will have benefit?” he proposes, mostly just to be contrary.

“And do *what* with them?” Nott asks, “We don’t have the resources set up for that.”

“And just think,” Harry circles around, drawing near to Umbridge’s desk as if he’s going to peer over and then changing direction last minute, “If the right person found this list - that’s a whole generation of muggleborn and muggle-raised who might never end up at Hogwarts. And who would know?”

“And she supports this?” Tom peers at the woman who barely appears to be paying attention. A Ravenclaw has had their hand up for the

past five minutes and she's not even noticed.

"Yes," Avery nods, "They want to try and 'join our worlds'. That's what Father said."

In the corner of his vision, Harry cocks his head, eyeing up Umbridge with those silver-sheen eyes. He reminds Tom of a wolf, head tilted, watching its prey stumble blindly through the forest. "They want to *control* our world," he corrects.

"Integrating muggleborns is not a *bad* idea," Tom ponders, "It's not their fault they are ignorant to our culture," he adds when Nott opens his mouth to protest. The mousy boy clicks his jaw closed with a snap. "Having children existing in the muggle world *is* a security risk," he continues, "How would you feel to know your heritage has been denied to you simply due to *ignorance* ?"

"But…" Nott looks conflicted, face pale, "Aren't they… their magic is weaker. It's got none of the power the bloodlines carry."

"Fresh blood to a population *is* a good thing," Harry remarks. "Even if the muggle culture is not."

Tom just fixes Nott with a piercing gaze, "The pureblood's obsession with marrying cousins isn't healthy," he says, "You know that, right? Muggles have studies on it, and so do the Unspeakables. There's a theory that conflicting magical bloodlines actually *increases* the likelihood of squibs."

"Father read that paper," Avery has given up even pretending to look like he's reading the assigned chapter, "He says the research the Ministry are trying to hush it up. That magical births are declining and they don't have another explanation. Father says it's the fault of the muggles, of course. That they're to blame."

" *How* ?" Nott sneers, "They're *muggles!* "

"Didn't you hear about the atomic bomb?" Harry croons, leaning over Avery's desk. The other boy is oblivious as Harry twists to peer at the textbook page Avery has left open, "They destroyed the city in the blink of an eye. They sent whole populations into death camps. Their guns tear metal into your flesh and leave you bleeding out on the ground." Harry's fingers brush the page and for a moment Tom thinks he sees it shift.

Avery doesn't notice, "There was a scandal back in the summer. A

muggle published a photo of a dragon. The obliviators hushed it up, but they couldn't erase the photograph. It was printed in too many papers and they had a…" he wrinkles his nose, trying to remember the word, "Vee-o?"

" *Video* ?"

"That's it!" Avery says, "It's a moving photo, like our portraits, but they can copy it and send it everywhere. They had to cover it up as a fake, but it took the whole department two weeks of working overtime. What if someone catches a moving video of *magic?* We're not prepared to cope with that."

Harry, still leaning near Avery's desk, makes another half-hearted attempt to turn the page of the textbook. Tom does it for him, ignoring the look Avery shoots him. "What do you think will happen," Harry asks, "The next time they catch magic on film? What will they do the next time a Dark Lord summons fire through a city for their cause and it can't be hidden? What will they do the next time a muggleborn decides to cure an incurable muggle disease using magic?"

"That's why the Reaper called for separation," Tom realises.

"No child should have to grow up afraid of their own magic," Harry says.

"The Dark Lord called for a *retreat* ," Nott sneers, "Isn't that the path of a coward?"

"He wanted a new world," Tom contemplates.

"He'd give up *everything* just to play nice."

"There's not much point in forcing coexistence. Not when nobody wants it."

"Why start *another* war?" Harry drawls, "We'd already lost so much--"

They could though, Tom thinks. It would be neat, easy - an extermination of the pests that roam the world. Why should they have to give up what is rightfully theirs?

But muggleborns are the issue. The clash of the two. Magic and muggle. If you commit one species to extinction what do you do about those who are half of each species?

Retreating is the peaceful option. It is the weak option. But it's neat, Tom does have to admire that. Step back and forge your own world. It's *grandiose* in its ambition. The potential there is *unlimited* . There would be no bowing to the rules and the paradigm because they could make their own.

"Do you *see* ?" Harry breathes, eyes fever-bright, pupils dilated with the vision. Tom *does* see. And a part of him *longs* for that world where he could have grown up knowing who he was, instead of being told he was *wrong* . A *freak* . An *aberration* .

And Tom turns away from the other. "The Dark Lord should have had the strength to fight for our world first," he remarks. Like being slapped in the face, Harry falls back, disappointment in his gaze. Tom ignores him, turning to Nott, "Why should we run? We have *magic* . Co-existence would not be accepted, by either side. I think everyone is in agreement that secrecy will not be maintained indefinitely. Our only advantage right now is their ignorance. If you consider them as a threat then the Ministry *have* to be seen acting. Hence this bill. The Muggleborn Registration Act is a bit useless. It doesn't address any of the issues at hand. It's the most passive way of showing the Ministry are doing something without really doing anything."

"Detention."

He had not noticed Umbridge. He could kick himself for it. He sees Harry's gaze track her. Harry *had* noticed her, but stung, perhaps, at Tom's derision of policies Harry clearly believed in, he had said nothing.

"Professor?" He schools his tone into that of the polite, attentive student.

"For bringing politics into the classroom," Umbridge snips back, "Blatant disrespect of the Ministry will not be tolerated in my presence."

His jaw clenches. Avery's back is ramrod straight, gaze down. Nott looks nervous but also won't meet their teacher's gaze. Tom wants to lash out. To *hurt* . To scoop her thoughts from her mind and *twist* …

He does not. He cannot draw attention to himself. He ducks his head, "Apologies, Professor," he says, "I will make sure to keep politics out of your classroom."

"See that you do," Umbridge's beady eyes look triumphant, "Leave

them to better witches and wizards to worry about."

Tom *seethes* . Nott sucks in a sharp breath, looking worriedly at Tom. He is aware of Tom's penchant for violence. "I'll do that when I find one," he says, before he can really think about it.

There's the bark of a laugh from Harry, but when he glances back the wraith is gone. Avery still has his head down but he's fighting a smile. And Nott is looking at him with something almost akin to respect even as Umbridge pronounces a full week of detention.

Worth it, Tom thinks, bitterly.

*

He knocks and enters the classroom at seven pm sharp three days later. Dolores Umbridge is sitting at her desk in glaring pink. Even the quill is a soft baby rose. It pauses as she looks up at him, "Ah, Mr Riddle. Take a seat."

He sits at the desk in front of her. She makes him sit there in awkward silence for five minutes while she finishes whatever document she is writing out. She completes it with a swirl and a sigh, "Even at Hogwarts I still have responsibilities," she says, almost regretfully, "Minister Fudge relies on me, as Undersecretary, to support him and council him. He wanted to know my opinion on the latest bill regarding muggleborn registration."

Tom resists the urge to twitch. Speaking up about that had already earned him this detention.

"You were so vocal about it in class. Why not share what you think, Mr Riddle?"

He shifts, subtly. There's something in the way she says his surname that puts him on edge. Like a claw being dragged along a chalkboard. "It's a list of all children with muggle heritage," he says, slowly, "Just a record. It could be used to benefit these children... or disadvantage them." There. A nice, neutral answer.

Umbridge looks annoyed by that, as if she'd been hoping to antagonise him. She stands, pulling open a drawer and retrieves a quill and parchment. She waddles over to him and places it on the desk before him. " *Riddle* ," she draws out the word, "That's not a pureblood name."

"My mother was a Gaunt," Tom says, surely that's well known by this

point. He's famous for surviving the attack on the Gaunts.

"Was she?" The woman's voice is sweet enough to crystallise, "I heard she was a squib. A cross-eyed wench who didn't even get a Hogwarts letter."

Tom does not respond. He does not rise to the bait. He is not a Gryffindor.

"You will write," she says, tone still sugar crystals and honey, " *I will respect my betters* ."

He picks up the quill. It feels a little like defeat. "How many times?" he asks, gaze fixed on the desk.

"Until it sinks in," she says, moving away.

There's no ink, Tom realises, as he moves his quill to the parchment. Then, almost morbidly understanding suddenly what it is that he holds in his hand, he strikes the quill over the parchment.

There's a sharp stab of pain from the back of his hand. He curves the letters into a 'w' and watches as they split open on his skin. It fades, leaving the skin red and irritated, but when he goes to rewrite it, he carves them afresh.

He stills. This is *torture* . To allow this in a school? A place of learning?

The quill bends in his grip. Surely if Dumbledore *knew* ... if Slughorn or McGonagall or...

He sees himself asking to stay for the summer and the sad but sealed off expression in the headmaster, he sees the way McGonagall busies herself with work and her duties as deputy, the way Slughorn cares only for collecting students who might one day give him party favours out of pity.

"Is there a problem?" Umbridge asks from her desk. Her smile is one of victory.

Tom will make her eat that smile, he vows, shaking his head, "No, Professor," he says, and he turns his eyes to the parchment and begins to write.

*

The tap drips. The bandages are soft on his skin. He plans how he will take her apart piece by piece carving into her skin. How he'll snap her bones and strip her flesh from her skull. How he'll watch her on her knees in the dirt, her blood and the soil mixing until she sees how pure she really is. Until--

"What happened to your hand?"

He looks up, meeting Harry's gaze in the mirror. Those green eyes are focussed on his partially wrapped hand.

The tap drips.

"Detention," Tom says, twisting around, "What? Too busy to keep track of me all the time?"

The dig goes unnoticed, the other boy engaged by Tom's bandaged skin. "What is-- *Tom* --" Harry reaches. The static of his touch makes the hairs on the back of Tom's neck rise. Harry sounds so soft. So tender. The shame Tom feels at being seen in this moment of weakness makes him want to pull his hand away, but it is already too late.

Harry stills. His mercury-green eyes trace the words for a long moment. Tom feels anger flare, twists his wrist to break the gaze and looks up to stare at Harry. They're almost the same height, he realises, suddenly. He's grown older while Harry still flits about in age as his moods take him.

Black hair, pretty green eyes, Tom wonders what it would feel like to run his fingers through those messy dark curls.

"She *hurt* you," Harry says. Tom's not sure what that emotion in Harry's voice is, but he thinks he enjoys it, being the centre of the other's attention, "She *dared* to hurt you."

"I've got it handled," Tom says, "I've got a plan--"

"Then why haven't you?" Harry says, choking his protests. There is silence aside from the dripping tap. A head tilt and *disappointment* but not at Tom. Disappointment *for* him. "They look down on you," he murmurs, "Because you've a muggle name," he answers for Tom, "Because the Gaunt legacy doesn't mean anything when your uncle is a madman, your mother a near squib and your father a muggle."

"Shut up."

"Because no matter what you do they'll always judge you because of where you came from. Because they think they're better."

"Stop talking."

"And you'll try and change it, try and learn their ways but you'll always be an outsider to the purebloods and too ingrained to the system for the muggleborns."

"Harry."

The other falls silent.

"So what do you propose?" he asks, eventually, when the silence is too heavy and when his fingers long to crush something beneath them. Preferably Umbridge' throat but...well...maybe later. "How do you win when the whole world is against you?"

Colling fingers that aren't really there press against the scarred words, "Be *better* ," Harry says. "Prove them all wrong."

"I already *am* ," Tom snarls.

"Then," Harry says, eyes sheening silver, "Make them see that."

*

The Slytherins are uneasy. Avery can feel the tension. Tom threw down the gauntlet at their Defence Professor knowing full well that standing against her was standing against the Ministry. Most of their parents work in the Ministry, have direct contact with the Minister regularly. And Tom has finally straightened his spine and started picking them apart like fishbones to pick his teeth with.

“We’re going to fail defence at this rate,” Flora Carrow despairs, “We’re not learning *anything* . It’s my OWL year. If I fail my Defence OWL mother is going to *kill* me.”

“She won’t kill you,” Hestia pats her sister on the arm, “She *might* disown you…”

“Just use the old textbook,” Tom says from the seat he has claimed near the fire. He has shed blood over that seat. Nobody dares challenge him for it.

“I’ve got a copy of the fifth year’s textbook!” Flora snips back, “I got it from someone in the upper year. But practising the spells? The *duelling*

alone is *impossible* with only one person."

"I'll duel you," Nott says.

"You turned Antonin's arm to wood in transfiguration the other day!"

"And?"

"You were meant to be turning metal to wood, human transfiguration is NEWT level, you imbecile!"

"My bad?"

"For the love of--" Tom slams his book closed, "I'll teach you," he says, "We'll make it a study group." He seems taken aback by his year mates staring at him.

"Really?" Flora's eyes are wide, "I mean - yes, please! If you have time around prefect duties and all your detentions--" she stops talking when Tom's expression sours at the reminder of his detentions. But instead of deterring him it only secures his interest more fully.

His smile is like a razor blade dripping blood. Avery feels like someone crawled over his grave at the look in Tom's eyes, "Oh, but Madame Umbridge would *so* hate it if we strayed from her perfectly crafted Ministry curriculum. And I have so enjoyed disappointing her."

"She'll be out for blood," Avery warns Tom.

If anything his friend only looks *thrilled* . He looks bloodthirsty when he grins, flashing his teeth. *Bring it* , Avery can almost hear. He's noted Tom's bandaged hand, he knows this Ministry witch has declared war. "Your father," he directs at Avery, "Does he have any information on her?"

"I'll ask," he says, "She's pureblood, he told me that much. Worked her way up. Used to work for the Improper Use of Magic Office. I'll see what else he knows."

"Are you serious?" Rosier interjects, "About starting a club?" he looks uncertain. He flexes his fingers, as if reminded of when Tom broke his arm that one time. But he looks *eager* . To practise magic, to *learn* --

"Of course," Tom says, blase, "Mostly to study Defence. I feel our teaching is a little… *lacking* . But also: politics. Career planning.

Things this school isn't teaching us. And probably won't teach us if Dumbledore and Umbridge are all they give us." And there's that edge to Tom's grin, that sour taste to the air. "And of course…" he says, taking in the group gathered around him. He hasn't moved from his claimed seat, leaning back and sitting on it like a throne, "If I'm teaching you magic it's only right that we all bring stuff to share."

Rosier's jaw works soundlessly for a moment before he's agreeing, "Of course," he says, like he would never dare to imply any differently, "I've got some History of Magic notes I can share, and I can help with Charms…"

"Your family has some old grimoires, right?"

Like a fly caught in the honey vice. Rosier can't help but struggle.

"Yes," he says, cautiously, "They've been in the family for generations but a lot of it is old… family magicks…"

"I'm sure we can all share," Tom's smile is saccharine.

"Do the Gaunts have anything?"

Avery thinks if it had been anyone other than Flora asking with wide-eyes and an unconscious naivety they'd have been skinned alive for it. Tom's smile grows thin. "I didn't grow up with them," he says, "I wouldn't know."

"That must be terrible for you. To not know your own heritage."

Tom looks at her curiously, a new light in his eyes, "Yes," he agrees, tonelessly, clearly pondering something, "But we all share traditions. We all share magic. While some magical abilities aren't… replicable… we can share something, right?"

That pet snake of his is around his neck. Avery isn't sure when she appeared but she's hissing something, gently. Proof of Tom's heritage right there, the snake blood and the snake's tongue sitting in the house of the serpents.

"Of course, Tom," Avery is first to agree. He can see the way the cards will fall and he is not the only one who can feel the way magic is drawn to Tom. He's smart. Powerful. And ruthless.

He knows better than to stand against him.

Nott is nodding his agreement, the Carrow twins and Rosier also joining in a chorus. Even Lestrange, Dolohov and Mulciber - normally on the edge of their usual circle have drawn closer. “We’re in,” Dolohov says.

Tom’s smile is damning. The serpent in Eden, watching the fall. “Then let us begin.”

*

The Slytherins fall in line like they’re *thirsting* for it. Like they’re waiting for a leader to come along and show them what to do. Tom is not the only one to have views on the bills and policies the Ministry is currently discussing - he’s just the first to send out that questing tendril of indignation and revolution to prompt the anger from the others.

During the school day he is the perfect prefect. Top grades. Charming smile. The-Boy-Who-Survived. Slughorn starts dropping hints about having a group of students for dinner one evening with other guests. A chance for *networking* .

And after hours he teaches the Slytherins. Dips his fingers in magic a shade darker than it should be. It leaves his fingers stained but the taste of bitter cherries is sweet on his tongue. The awed looks the others give him as he *breathes* magic is sweeter still.

Triumph would make a home in his veins if not for Dolores Umbridge.

Unfortunately Tom’s interest in current politics *galls* her. His status as a celebrated hero, being a halfblood with a muggle father, is a stabbing thorn that try as she might, she cannot pull out.

So like any foolish animal she chews at the thorn. Spits Tom out several evenings a week with a bleeding hand and a sickly sweet smile. He plans her death in his head. Stands in the bathroom, wrapping the wound on the back of his hand that is slowly becoming a scar.

(He refuses to let her scar him, but there are spells to remove scars, some of them require some blood and death but that’s a small price to pay.)

(He dislikes the reminder that he is only human. That he can be hurt, that he can be bled.)

Murtlap Essence takes the worst of the pain away from Tom's scars and will prevent it from scarring too badly. Harry commented how he wished he had known facts like that when he was going through school. Healing is still not in Hogwarts' curriculum.

He teaches Tom what he knows. Small spells and potion remedies. Pieces of anatomy he had self-taught. The other bits he had also found out--

"Isn't this necromancy?" Tom asks, as Harry explains carefully how to go about knitting flesh back together. They sit together in a room Harry has shown Tom on the seventh floor. The Come and Go Room. The Room of Requirement.

(Harry keeps his secrets close, Tom thinks, it had taken Harry five years to share this marvel of Hogwarts with him.)

"Yes," he says, with an easy shrug, "Technically."

Tom's fingers twitch to practise on something, but the boy is not masochistic enough to cut into his own flesh, even for this leap in magical skill. "Do you know necromancy?" he presses, always curious. Harry has killed people. He exists on the edge of Tom's peripheral vision like an oncoming storm - all blizzards and thunder and that bitter taste of sour cherries. Dark magic.

Harry exists both more and less tangible in this room. Something about the variable dimensional magic the room is built in It's why they still favour the Chamber, even though it is harder to get to.. At Tom's question his whole image shimmers in and out of view. "Yes," he says, not lying.

"Can you raise the dead?" Tom asks, eagerness bleeding into his voice like an ink spill over water.

"Me, personally? No." Harry rolls his eyes, "I said I knew necromancy, not that I practised it."

"But do you? Practise it? Or did you… before…? Can you control death?"

The other leans back into the garish sofa the Room had summoned. Tom suspects they resemble something he'd find in the Gryffindor Common Room. He tries to envision, for a moment, what it would be like if Harry was an actual student and he had snuck into the Gryffindor tower to have this conversation. Tries to envision himself

and his circle of Slytherins he has formed, except it's Harry and a circle of Gryffindors.

There are words on the tip of his tongue. A question. A realisation.

Harry laughs, interrupting Tom's thoughts. He's handsome, like this, Tom thinks, all loose limbs, bright eyes and casual power. "The dead are not our to control. They are beyond our reach. The process of dying - life into decay, decay into rot - that is something we can control. That's the heart of necromancy. Puppeteering and healing. The occasional seance." He shrugs, "Some family lines have a partiality to death magic more than others. Mine was one of them. It's why I took to healing so well. That and a propensity for wild adventures."

"Is there a limit to healing?"

"Not if you delve deep enough," Harry shrugs, "But the cost grows."

"And what about death? Can you heal death?"

"I think that's caused resurrection. The idea of healing is to normally catch it *before* that stage, Little Slytherin."

Tom doesn't roll his eyes. He doesn't. It's hard sometimes, especially when Harry looks the same age as him, to forget this is a grown wizard with skills beyond his own who utilises sarcasm like a knife. "But can you? Theoretically is it possible to bring someone back from the dead?"

" *Intact* ?"

"What do you mean 'intact'?" he sneers.

"You can heal the body. Make the heart beat and blood pump. But they're still just as dead as a corpse."

"Can you fix that? Bring back the spirit?"

" *Theoretically* ." Harry drawls out the word like he's savouring each phonetic sounds as it leaves his mouth. "There are no limits to magic, only limits to your understanding and competence. But in practice...? No. Reaching to the place that souls go is beyond even the greatest of wizards."

Tom stands. He paces for a few steps before spinning. Harry watches

him, fingers tapping a rhythm on his knee.

If Tom can't recover from death, maybe there are ways to avoid it. "What about *never* dying? Keeping the soul tied to the body forever?"

Harry's gaze is heavy now, "What books have you been reading, Little Slytherin?"

He's been raiding the pureblood libraries of his followers. He doesn't tell Harry. He'll look through them for planar travelling another time.

Instead he continues his line of questioning. "If the soul remains tied to this living plane then you'll never pass on. You'll be fundamentally immortal."

Harry doesn't say anything.

"And..." Tom continues, "And what if there were several tethers? It would be harder to kill them all off, to even find them all in order to sever them. You'd live as long as your tethers survived."

"Tethers." Harry's tone is mocking. "Soul tethers. Do you think me *stupid* , Tom Riddle?" His smile is dangerous. Cracking ice beneath careful footsteps, "That's a pretty term, darling, for an abhorrent tearing of the soul. Tether is a much nicer word than *horcrux* , right?"

He *knows* , Tom thinks, of course he knows. This phantom, this wraith... Good men do not trap themselves between the folds of existence. Good men do not haunt a teenage wizard and bribe them into dubious rituals and spells to help him return to this world.

Tom's never cared. He does not believe in Good as a concept. He believes in Power.

And Harry is certainly powerful.

"Can it be done?" He refuses to be embarrassed for being found out. For his question to be stripped bare to its roots, to its foundation. "Theoretically," he adds, mockingly.

"Oh, Tom, we have magic. Of course it's possible if you put your mind to it."

*

They do not have a corpse to speak through. They do not have a physical tether to Harry in the afterlife. Necromancy is not a skill

Hermione is good at. It galls her that there are magics she can not do from a book.

Ron takes the lead. His magic is older than hers, set in his blood, in his bone, in his family for generations. There is an element of truth to the pureblood rhetoric. Hermione tells him what to do from the instructions she's parsed out from old family texts they'd liberated from a pureblood library back during their guerilla war.

"Mix the bone powder with the yew. A drop of blood from each of us. And something precious to the person we're trying to summon - I dug out his old snitch. Drop it in the bowl and set it on fire."

"Whose bones are these, Hermione?" Ron asks as he follows her instructions.

"His parents."

Her husband blanches, "What did you *do* ?"

"We have to make sure we're summoning the right spirit. We don't have his body, so his parents bones. Blood of the servants - that's us. Yew for his wand. And an object precious to them--"

The objects lie on a plate between them, in the middle of runes she has painstakingly drawn in the soil of their back garden. The trees of the nearby wood rustle gently in the evening breeze and above the stars glimmer.

The fire burns bright. It flares and almost blinds her as it consumes the scattered objects before them. Ron's chanting is measured and steady and she feels the magic crackle in the air. The trees rustle around them, fiercer, as if trying to whisper to them. Hermione feels something crawling over her skin, and then it's gone, brushing past and exiting as if it were never there. She waits for *something* . A voice, a shadow, an afterimage behind closed eyelids and the blinding spots she's still blinking away from the fire.

"Well?" Ron's voice breaks through the silence, "Was something meant to happen?"

Hermione can feel her heart thudding in her chest. She's trembling uncontrollably, the static in the air feels electric. She reaches forwards to where the ash is all that remains of the objects that had sat between them. Her fingers sift through it and it falls to the ground, a slave to gravity. "It was meant to summon his spirit. To call an imprint of his

soul and spirit to stand before us…" she says. “It was meant to summon those who have died.”

"Nothing happened," Ron observes, "We called for the dead and nothing happened." A beat. "We called for *Harry* and nothing happened. Which means--"

"He's not dead," Hermione breathes. Ron's hand is on hers suddenly, grip bruising and she meets his wide blue eyes, "Harry *isn't* dead."

Chapter End Notes

> Thanks to easterndreamer for giving some feedback and casual beta-ing on parts of this chapter!

curse

Avery watches Tom Riddle. The Boy-Who-Survived. The child who, they whispered, was the reason the Dark Lord died.

The Dark Lord had been a hurricane turning everything upside down. There was no limit to who was touched - he used pure bloods and muggleborns just the same. Avery's father had always stayed back. Kept his head down. Avoided making an enemy...but never really made an ally either. Avery follows a lot of his father's advice - the man had always seemed so safe. So rock-foundation-solid in his knowledge and wisdom that it was reassuring to his son to continue along that path.

But now he knows better. He sees the stirrings and he will not step back into the shadows.

Avery refuses to be such a coward.

Watching Riddle, he does not think the boy was the reason the Dark Lord fell. But he's certainly made use of it

Avery will follow Tom until the end. The boy is all rough edges. He tries to refine them, but all he does is make the razor blades too fine to see.

They cut just the same.

He moves amongst the Slytherins like a shadow, correcting a wand movement here, watching with sharp eyes as Nott uses a spell that Avery is pretty sure is illegal. He stops by where Avery is perched on a chair near a table in the classroom they are practising in.

(Tom is primarily selfish. The Chamber is *his* secret. The Room of Requirement is *his* discovery. Did you think he would *share* ?)

“Here,” Avery slides a book across the table to Tom, “Found a copy in the Restricted Section.”

Tom’s fingers brush over ‘Secrets of the Darkest Arts’. They linger over the cover. Avery is pretty sure it’s made with human skin but that doesn’t appear to deter the other in the slightest.

“I… we have a couple of books about the other topic you asked about in the library at home,” Avery adds, before Tom can ask, “I can’t have

them sent - in case the owls get checked - but I'll pass them on over the summer."

"Appreciated," Tom inclines his head. It's the closest Avery thinks he'll get to a 'thanks' from the other boy.

The boy had always been… odd. An outsider in his own house. Descendant to one of the most famous magical lines with a muggle surname. A conundrum at its heart. He did not carry his uncle's madness. Not obviously, at any rate, but Avery remembers Rosier's broken arm, he remembers Dolohov's bleeding nose and burnt books, he remembers Lestrange slipping Tom bags of coins for almost six months solid.

He is vicious. He does not care about other people. Avery catches him watching human interaction with befuddlement at times, like he's trying to work out the answer to human reactions and processes and not factoring emotion into the equation.

(He also has an odd habit of staring into space and Avery has even heard him talking to empty air before, but he pretends he hasn't observed this, he doesn't want to risk Tom's wrath.)

Tom spends his free time perfectly unpicking the Ministry's current policies and the Reaper's dead crusade. He sits there with fresh ideas and fresh ambition and Avery had wondered, once, why people followed the previous Dark Lord.

Oh , he thinks, looking at Tom's gleaming eyes and impassioned speech. That's why.

*

Umbridge continues to plague the school.

"Education Decree?" one of Flora Carrow's friend's - Lucretia Black - one of the many Black cousins - sounds rightfully disgusted. Some of the purebloods struggle to produce a single heir, and others, like the Blacks, spawn almost copiously, Tom contemplates. Lucretia wrinkles her nose and twists to look at where the caretaker is nailing an announcement to the stone of the Entrance Hall. "Who approved of this?"

"The Hogwarts Board didn't," Avery says, voice low, eyes darting out to try and spot where Umbridge is. "I asked my father about her. The name is a pureblood name, but it's a pitiful house. There's an

Umbridge who works for the Department of Magical Maintenance."

"A janitor?" Nott and Lucretia are in sync as they both sneer at the realisation.

"Not sure who her mother is," Avery shrugs, "She *could* be a pureblood. But she could just as easily be half-blood."

There's no definitive proof, but it might do in a pinch.

"No organised meetings unless approved," Flora flounces up, "Are you going to apply for approval, Tom? Umbridge is slowly getting more and more power… first this High Inquisitor… who knows what's next?"

"It's illegal," Tom says. He tastes blood. He wishes it was Umbridge's.

A new voice chimes in, tone melodious and crisp, "Only for organised meetings."

Tom turns. Next to him Avery and Nott slide into place behind him, with Lucretia and Flora behind. Where they should be, he thinks, *following* . Lucretia breaks the formation almost immediately, skipping forwards a few steps to the boy who has interrupted, "Arcturus," she greets her cousin, "What do you mean?"

Arcturus Black the third, or maybe the fourth (Tom's not familiar with their extensive and sprawling family tree) smiles at Tom. He's a sixth year student. Pale, slate-grey eyes. The older boy has not bothered Tom since Tom dug out some blackmail material on him in Tom's first year.

(He never did ask how Harry knew the rumours about the boy's mother. She'd died in childbirth continuing the pureblood line. She was no longer alive to question or protest the accusations surrounding the purity of her blood. But the rumours hold enough measure that Arcturus had left Tom alone.)

"The decree states no organised meetings by students can take place," Arcturus drawls. He does not say it. He does not need to.

Tom tilts his head, "So we make them unorganised," he finishes, "And if needed we get Slughorn involved. No doubt his little club will be affected by this." His fingers find his wand and he feels it warm under his touch, "Why so concerned, Black?"

“I thought I could offer my assistance. My family’s library is extensive.”

He stands there waiting. Ready to *bow* , Tom thinks, so different from the casual jibes he had thrown out five years prior. Now his tone is measured and he sizes Tom up with something almost akin to respect in his gaze. “And in return?” Tom asks, wanting to hear him say it.

“I know a few other Slytherins who could use some defence practice. The NEWT classes are just as tragic as the OWL classes. None of us will pass our exams at the rate the current teaching standard is going.”

“Downhill?” Lucretia scoffs, but even she turns to Tom, waiting for his verdict.

He nods, short and sharp, gaze flicking over Arcturus’ shoulder, “Madame Umbridge,” he says, before someone can implicate them, “We were just discussing your promotion. I believe congratulations are in order.”

He clenches his fist, and the skin pulls sharp over the words that scar the back of his hand. He’s stayed out of detention for about two weeks and he knows she’s still looking for a chance to drag him back to nightly torture sessions.

“Thank you, Mr Riddle,” she sniffs the air, nose angled upright and her gaze flits to Arcturus, “Is there a problem here, Mr Black?”

“Just as he said, Professor,” Arcturus’ tone is benign, “Curious about what changes you would be making during your tenure here.”

For as long as it lasts goes unsaid.

Everyone hears it.

*

Arcturus Black brings with him another Black cousin, a Rowle, a Crabbe, a McMillan and a Moon, the latter of which Tom is pretty sure is a half-blood which is surprising more than a distaste. They get written permission from Professor Slughorn to use an abandoned part of the dungeon. Tom and several of the other purebloods turn up to smile charmingly at him and share dinner one night. The old man seems to take it as a favour owed and so doesn’t mention it to Umbridge when she decides to start stalking the corridors, decked in blinding pink.

There's a new Education Decree every week or so. Slowly the Ministry wraps their chains around Hogwarts, shackling it. Tom's home slowly but surely is being throttled. The chatter in the corridors grows quiet. The smiles grow faded. Eyes grow flat.

Their teeth grow sharp. Their words grow bitter. Even the other houses are restless. Three Gryffindors and two Ravenclaws are spotted rubbing their hands after a loud escalated argument when Umbridge insulted Professor Flitwick. Rose Weasley looks particularly smug when a charmed gnome decides to stalk Umbridge around reciting bad haikus formed out of the Ministry decrees.

Arcturus sits with Tom's group in the common room. He watches Tom with sharp eyes that see too much. He says even less.

"I think Black has a crush on you," Avery tells Tom one day after History of Magic. How the ghost is still teaching while every other teacher appears to be getting fired is beyond Tom's understanding.

Tom almost snorts, "Don't be ridiculous. Isn't he dating Melania McMillan?"

"Not *Arcturus*," Avery rolls his eyes, "His younger cousin."

"Which one? There are multiple Blacks."

"The youngest one. Bellatrix. She's a year or two younger."

Tom takes a moment to even place who Avery is talking about. Another few seconds to try and figure out why Avery has brought this up, "Your point?" he asks, when it doesn't make itself clear.

Avery just looks at him.

("I met Regulus once or twice," Harry comments, when prompted about the Blacks, "Arcturus' father. He was a quiet sort. The opposite of his brother. Contemplative. Sharp. Pressured by his parents - the usual pureblood spiel. If Arcturus is with you then he's with you. But if he changes his mind…")

Maybe another connection to the Blacks is a good idea. And if the one girl has a crush maybe he can use that. She does watch him, he notices after. During their secluded lessons in the dungeons he can feel her pale grey eyes on him. She pays close attention to his borderline dark spells, and seems to sense the way magic clings to his fingers, almost humming-- *begging* to be used.

“Bella,” he finds her at dinner, sitting next to Urma Crabbe. He is smiles and charm and perfect manners. The fourth year with dark curls and a wicked grin eats it up.

“Tom,” she says, brightly.

“Lucretia mentioned you were struggling with transfiguration,” he keeps the conversation light. Topics he's familiar with. “I can help you, if you'd like.”

She lights up, leans forwards like a flower to the sun. How foolish, Tom thinks. Don't flowers know that the sun will burn them up, use them as fuel and spit out a burnt husk, withered and dead? “I find the way Dumbledore teaches is so droll,” she says, “He's very by the books. I'm amazed a man like him managed to defeat Grindelwald at all.”

“I heard he fought the Reaper once,” Urma says, “They say the Reaper fled bleeding.”

“I didn't think he could bleed,” Arcturus leans over, “Father told me he was a dead man and dead men don't bleed.”

“Dead or not,” Tom weaves his words, “They worshipped him. All Dumbledore did was succeed in martyring his cause further.” He reaches for a glass of pumpkin juice. He hates the taste, but his scarred hand catches the light. They all see it. They all *know* . “He suggested educational reforms, didn't he? Maybe he had the right idea. An official curriculum. A restructuring of the teaching system. Some of our staff members clearly aren't up to code--”

“ *Tom* ,” Nott is his warning. He perfects his smile, turns to see Dolores Umbridge appear behind him. It’s like she’s a hovering vulture, just waiting to pick clean his bones.

“I do hope you're keeping politics away from the dinner table, Mr Riddle,” she says.

“Just remarking on what a fine job you're doing,” Tom concurs, “Assessing the teachers is long overdue. Why - we've had five different Defence teachers since I started here. And last year we had a suspected supporter of the Reaper.”

She shudders, “Don't say that vile name.”

Tom's head tilts, as if sensing a kill and not going for it. “Apologies, I

wasn't aware it made you…uncomfortable…"

She puffs up, like an irritated peacock. Something gleams on her chest and whatever other witticisms Tom was going to sneak by her wither on his tongue.

"At least he's dead," Bellatrix is saying, but Tom's not listening.

His gaze is fixed on the necklace that hangs from Umbridge's neck. Golden and emerald green. A small snake. Gaudy, over-large pendant hanging from a silver chain.

It's a locket.

It's *his* locket.

His twisted barbs evaporate leaving behind a metallic taste. He tries to remember what he had been saying but all he can feel is *fury* .

She's wearing *his* necklace.

She's --

The 'S' stuffed with emeralds mocks him.

She notices where his gaze rests, turning away from idle comments with the Slytherins she's trying to to leverage, "Ah, yes, my locket. Ancestral. The 'S' stands for 'Selwyn'. Direct ancestor." She puffs her chest out with pride, drawing attention to the gleaming locket.

A lie. Tom can *taste* it.

"It's very nice, Professor," Bellatrix says, demurrely.

Rage is like thick tar. He wades through it, tries to climb out and stand above it but it's all he can see. He should keep his cards close to his chest. He should hold his tongue. Play it like a Slytherin.

But his blood is muddied by generations of madness and he can feel it *burn* and so he doesn't even really try that hard to stop the words slipping out, "It doesn't stand for Selwyn. That's a lie."

Umbridge turns to him, flushing with anger. Lucretia ducks her head and Avery and Nott pretend to look elsewhere. "Excuse me, Mr Riddle?" Umbridge's voice is sweet. As if *taunting* him… daring him to speak up again.

He shouldn't. He should slip in a lie, spin a web like a spider, let the venom sink in like a snake until it paralyses the prey--

"The Selwyn colours are blue and silver," he says, "Not emerald green. Whoever sold this to you was clearly lying."

It's too late. She doesn't bite. "You doubt my knowledge of my own family?" She narrows her eyes, "Detention, Mr Riddle. For spreading lies and discourse." Her gaze flickers over the two Blacks and Tom's followers. "And causing unrest amidst respectable families."

The hiss of fury he turns into a sharp breath instead, but there's still the undertones of parseltongue to it. Umbridge strides off, smug victory radiating off her.

Arcturus sidles up to Tom and Nott, "The Selwyn's also," he notes, "Do not use a snake on their crest."

"Does that mean--" Bellatrix' tone is puzzled but with growing realisation before Tom cuts her off.

"Slytherin's locket was passed through my mother's family for generations. It was sold off on the fall of the Gaunts. But before it used to belong to my mother."

For the first time Tom wonders how Harry knew that, to once point it out to him with such confidence.

He wonders what other Gaunt artefacts were lost on the fall of the family.

(Peverell Ring, he sees in scrawled cursive in a journal, *he wanted an artefact* Dumbledore says.

Maybe it's time he pays his uncle a visit.)

"A Gaunt treasure," Arcturus inclines his head, "I didn't think they had many left. They were once one of the Noble Houses. They lost their money and lands over the years but the name still holds meaning." His gaze flickers to Umbridge's retreating form, "More than some families."

"She will regret stealing that which is not hers," he says, voice low enough only those around him hear. And they will not tell. His tone is thick with promise, like smoke curling lazily through the air. It trembles, magic so near to manifesting, tangible and heavy. It gives

the hint of summer air before a storm. The pressure change has the Blacks shifting their jaws.

It is a contrast to the winter chill Tom is used to with his wraith normally hovering around him.

He finds he rather likes the difference.

*

Tom Riddle walks to his detention planning murder.

“It’s mine,” Tom rants to his wraith. “That *toad* has no right to lay her fat fingers on it. To claim it’s from *her* filthy family line…”

Harry watches his anger. His fury. Reaches out with phantom fingers to try and calm him, “Little Slytherin,” he feels Tom’s rage like a fire. So much like his own temper before it became tempered cold by years and bitterness. “Do not do anything rash. Do not let them see weakness.”

“Letting her strut around gathering power to her is *weakness* ,” Tom curls his lip back, teeth bared in a bestial snarl as he rounds on Harry. Harry does not flinch. He eyes up the emotions Tom normally hides. The raw blades sharp and jagged over each gleaming in the light.

As if seeing Harry’s reaction, Tom schools his features, suppressing the rage. He reapplies the thin layer of humanity over the blades, blunting them to something socially acceptable. “Don’t do that,” Harry chides, “Don’t *hide* .”

He’d spent his childhood hiding himself. And then he’d spent his early Hogwarts years playing to other people’s expectations. It wears.

“Don’t fake it,” he warns Tom, “Not to me.”

Tom stills in the middle of the corridor, face growing slack. “Fake what?” he asks.

Harry just looks at him. Looks past the mask of civility. Past even the sharp unpleasant emotions that Tom buries like razor beneath his skin. Looks at the empty *hollowness* that lingers - loneliness and ambition lined - and looks at *Tom* . “Little Slytherin,” his scolding is gentle. *Fond* . He’s grown attached, he thinks, to this strange fey creature in the form of a boy. He’ll cut himself if he’s not careful.

Around them Hogwarts rests. Her eyes are closed, the lamps dim and shutters closed to the dark outdoors. Tom lingers for a moment, taking a slow and measured step towards Harry. He looks like he's about to say something but instead he twists away. "I have it handled," he says, irritation creeping into his voice. "I have a plan."

"Do you?"

Tom circles around him and doesn't answer.

*

The quill waits on the table. Umbridge sits at her desk with some official looking Ministry documents. She doesn't even look up at Tom as he slips in. It raises something in him, stirs some hungry predator that wants to sink its teeth in. For a moment there is only the scratch of her quill on parchment.

Then.

She looks up, realising that Tom has not sat down. "Is there a *problem* , Mr Riddle?" her voice is trying to be sweet and girly. Like that of a child. Innocent and naive when she is anything but.

"It's just I've done some research," he starts off politely, "And that locket of yours--" her hand goes to the pendant around her neck, "Whoever sold it to you must have lied - that's not from House Selwyn."

Her smile grows thin. Her eyes narrow.

"But there are records of a locket belonging to a pureblood line. One that goes back to the very founding of Hogwarts."

He has her attention. He sees her beady eyes grow greedy.

"There's a snake carved into the silver, Professor."

Tom can hear it hissing if he listens closely enough.

She considers his words. Weighs them up, measures them and judges. "You'd suggest that this is from Salazar Slytherin?" she asks, pudgy fingers smearing fingerprints over his locket.

"There are historical records," he says, "Documents. Family records--"

"There would be, wouldn't there?" she simpers, "And how do you

have access to those, hmm? I heard your family was dead. The muggle and the magical side."

"That locket doesn't belong to you. It belongs to someone of Slytherin's line," he articulates each word clearly. As if she's stupid. She bristles, taking the offence he means to make. He keeps going, going for the kill. "Your ancestry," he mocks, "This locket is not from your pedigree. *It's from mine* ." The last sentence slips out in parseltongue.

"Sit *down* ," she snaps, "And since the message clearly hasn't *sunk in* I think we should extend your detentions for another fortnight. For insulting a teacher and spreading *blatant* lies."

" Insulting?" he hisses, in English, "It's the *truth* ." He feels the words form in the back of his throat, doesn't hear them as parseltongue, only notes the reaction as Umbridge flinches from him. *"You're not better than those around you. You're a shallow facade."*

"A *month,"* she responds. "For insulting language."

"It's parseltongue," he has to physically twist his tongue into English. It's not the first time he has had to remind himself of what language he's speaking. But it's the first time in many years.

He hates her all the more for it.

"It's not English, Mr Riddle," her smile is so thin her lips have practically disappeared, "It's a sign of a half-breed and therefore will not be tolerated in this school."

Oh . Tom thinks. She's not just prejudiced against muggles and muggleborns. She's prejudiced against magical creatures as well. Jealousy and insecurity tangled in the core of her being.

"It's a bloodline *gift* ," he sneers, "And it's proof. That the locket you wear was stolen from my family. From *me* . Because if it was from your ancestor then you'd be able to understand me." His throat still pulsing with the undertone of hisses for part of the sentence. It sounds *horrifying* and Tom *likes it* . "And if they weren't my ancestry, then I wouldn't be able to tell the snake to *bite* ," the end of the sentence turns into guttural hisses.

The silver snake woven through the locket and emeralds *stirs* . Then it moves, quicksilver fast, emerald-studded scales. He doesn't see it make contact, just sees Umbridge's flinch as she slaps her neck. There's a

snap of the chain breaking as she claws the locket from her throat and flings it from her. It clatters across the room, coming to rest near the foot of a desk.

She pulls her wand to her hand, spells of blood across her pretty pink cardigan. "*You,*" she's raging. "Filthy, dirty-blooded--"

"Half-blood?" Tom's response slips into her rant, making it's home even before he reveals the dagger it holds, "Like you?"

She stills. Her eyes are small and furious. Like a pig, Tom thinks, like a pig before it takes a bite of human flesh.

"Must have been disgraceful," he says, pulling on the clues he has and on the *rage* he picks out of her gaze. Rage and *shame* . "To have generations of magic on one side. And to have *nothing* on the other side. A muggle heritage that came from nothing." A beat. "And didn't go anywhere either."

He watches Umbridge freeze. She still looks furious but it's a calm rage. Tom shifts, warily, aware suddenly he has found himself in the calm waters in the middle of the storm. "I don't know *where* you found these lies," she sniffs, "From those little pureblood friends I imagine. Friends whose families haven't had to work hard a day in their life. While I? I *deserve* to be here."

Tom takes a step backwards, hand going for his wand. He's too slow. The door clicks as the lock slides into place. His wand is torn from his pocket. Umbridge picks it up like it's something disgusting.

"Don't even think about raising your wand to your betters, child," she sniffs, "Especially someone besmirched by muggle blood. The great line of Slytherin…brought so low." She drops Tom's wand on the desk, stepping around it towards him.

"I apologise if I caused offence--" he says, through gritted teeth.

"Oh, Mr Riddle. Do I have to educate you on telling lies as well as teach you how to respect your betters?" she slips her wand out. A short, stunted thing that glows softly as she wields it. "It appears we may need to find a more…permanent method of education."

"That's not-- Professor, I think I've upset you--"

" *Crucio* ."

It lasts, in hindsight, about four seconds. Tom knows. His gaze follows the ticking of the clock on the wall. The small white cat sitting in the frame, a bow in its fur, twists and mouth opens in a silent mew. He sees the second hand ticking through the seconds.

Those seconds last *minutes* .

Pain, awful, terrible pain, crawls through his veins. Tom is aware of what the Cruciatus Curse is meant to feel like. There is an ache that sinks into his bones, decay eating at his flesh like maggots. It burns. It *hurts* . His fingers spasm and he remains standing. He is just gasping for air when the spell lifts.

“Hmm,” Umbridge’s fingers twist her short, unyielding wand in her hands, “Not quite as effective as I anticipated.”

“You’re casting it wrong,” Tom clicks his jaw that he had locked in a clench during the curse. His fingers stretch. He used to be able to do wandless magic when he was younger. Maybe he can do it now? Maybe he can wrap tendrils around the witch, choke her, *kill her* -- “You have to *want* to cause a person pain. If you don’t hate enough… it doesn’t hurt as much. Why do you think the Ministry made it *illegal* ?”

She reaches to one side and tips over a photo on her desk: the one of Cornelius Fudge. “What the Ministry doesn’t know,” she says, with a sickly smile, “Won’t hurt them. And besides? Who is going to believe a no-name halfblood? Your mother was nothing. Your father even less. You survived the Dark Lord by *chance* . There’s nothing special about you.”

“Say that to my face you worthless cur ,” the words slip from his mouth. They’re garbled. Hisses crawling up the back of his throat like a cat’s snarl. They are not slurred syllables and the escape of hot air - parseltongue is a visceral back-of-the-throat snarling hiss. Parseltongue does not come from the tongue, it comes from the vocal cords. Tom can feel the back of his throat form the words, can feel their meaning in his *bones* .

“Speak *English!”* Umbridge squeals, furious,wand raised, “Hissing to snakes won’t save you mad *freak* --”

She stabs the wand at him. Her mouth is forming the words, the anger flares and Tom knows already this one is going to hurt more than the previous. He is alone, wandless, the room is locked. Nobody can get in to help him.

Nobody with gravity to their bones.

“ *Cru* --”

Like a breath, suddenly Harry is there.

“You don’t *touch* him. He’s mine.”

Umbridge does not see him. Her gaze is still fixed on Tom’s. Something must change though because she chokes on the curse before the syllables finish falling, like blood from a wound speared with glass. Her tongue stutters and she stiffens, aware *something* has changed.

Harry is fury and frost and fate in human form. Tom can feel Harry’s magic pressing in on him, claustrophobic and leaving him gasping for air. Harry is not in this realm. But like pages of a book pressed together, sometimes the ink bleeds through.

Harry’s magic swirls like mist around him. Silver and smoke-coloured tendrils wrap around Umbridge’s wrists and neck. She stares straight through him to Tom, but there is a moment (a single half-heartbeat) that her gaze re-focuses on something else. Harry’s fingers close around Tom’s wand, still sitting on the desk next to Umbridge. It *hums* as if welcoming him, and a small lick of ice-white fire curls its way up Harry’s arm and leaps straight to Umbridge. Like St Elmo’s fire, jumping to the ship’s mast, Harry’s magic presses through the planes of the world, overflowing and pressing frostbite into Umbridge’s skin. She does not feel Harry’s presence the way Tom can, but she feels *that* .

“You--” she chokes as the silver mercury claws up her throat, “What--- what are you *doing* --?”

Frost burns on her skin, blackening it, rotting it through the bone. Tom watches in fascination as tendrils press down on her collarbone, through the blindingly pink fabric, through the thin veneer of human skin, through the flesh and the bone and the blood. Shackled by Harry’s magic: Umbridge rots. A corruption of ice and decay spreads from the magic chaining her wrists and neck. Tom watches her eyes grow small in the realisation of what is to come.

The realisation that she is nothing. That in the end - she will die. That in the end - she is merely another dead body in his wake.

She drops to the floor. Her chest is still. She isn’t breathing.

Harry stumbles back. His whole form flickers in and out of sight. It blurs, like a watercolour painting bleeding. “Get out of here,” he says to Tom, turning. The mercury green gaze is almost comforting in its familiarity. The fierce protectiveness shining out of his saviour makes something burn within him, a low simmering fire.

Harry saved him.

Harry saved *him* .

“Here,” Harry says. He cannot pick up Tom’s wand, but as his fingers pass through it the yew wood hums again, a discordant note of phoenix song. “The locket too. Then get out of here. Find an alibi. Be far away when they find her.”

Tom snatches up his wand, coming so close to Harry as he does so. The other boy stands over the body, hair wild, eyes *gleaming* behind the glasses he wears, even the frames not enough to hide that silvery sheen to them. Tom kneels, scooping the locket from where it had been thrown to the floor. He pauses, kneeling for a moment and eyeing up the still, motionless corpse. It’s so still, he thinks. No life or even the hint there once was life there. “I wonder if they’ll give us OWL adjustments,” he sniffs, glancing at the frostbitten corpse on the floor.

Harry stares at him from where he stands over Tom, “I just murdered your teacher and your only worry is your exams?” his head tilts, “ *Darling* Little Slytherin,” he appears amused, more than anything, “You’ll pass with Outstandings regardless, I would expect nothing less.”

Tom straightens, standing and stepping back so their gazes meet. Harry is looking at him less like he’s a student. Like he’s a child he’s mocking and coddling through school and with something that isn’t quite respect but isn’t quite wariness either. “They won’t even look your way,” Harry says, twisting back to the body. “Unless you’re still here. Standing over the body.”

“What are you doing?” Tom asks.

“I think you already know,” Harry says, and once more the air grows heavy as Harry presses his magic into the walls of reality.

His magic swirls like a hazy mist. Where tendrils had sunk into flesh with such viciousness, now instead they press down to the floor in lines of swirling silver black. They press into the stone, burning

themselves into the floor. A circle bisected with the thinnest of lines that form a triangle within the circle. Grindelwald's symbol, Tom recognises, but inverted into the circle.

It looks like an eye.

Tom recognises the symbol. He has seen it in history books. He has seen it in messy cursive in a journal written by a dead man.

The *Reaper's* symbol.

Harry's form stutters again. He blinks out so thoroughly Tom is convinced he's gone, grabbing the invisibility cloak from where it is secreted away into an inner pocket and sweeping it over himself. A shimmer and Harry reappears, shaking himself like a dog. "Oh, and Tom?" Harry calls after him.

Tom pauses, his invisibility cloak half draped over him.

"I'm going to need you to find me a wand."

*

Tom is shaking.

He holds out his hand, watching the slight tremors as he holds it out. He clenches his fist over them, knuckles white and nails digging into his palms until the shaking ceases. He takes a deep breath.

He refuses to allow his weakness to seep through. He refuses to cower. He is better than this.

He is *better* .

He can taste permafrost in the back of this throat. He thinks of the symbol of the Reaper burned into the floor. He thinks of Harry's fury. Of Harry's magic - a visceral oil-slick thing to be choked on. He thinks of the way Umbridge died. Once so confident in her power - reduced to a quivering, cowering mess. Human. Fragile and breakable and *weak* .

Death, Tom thinks, will not touch him.

He is greater than death. It has come for him before and failed. From the moment of his birth he was born to death. Yet he has overcome it.

He thinks of Harry, neither dead nor alive, just between. He thinks of

the quick death that Lockhart would have experienced and the slow death of Umbridge. Not that it matters. Tom will not die, so he does not need to worry about this death.

Immortality, he considers, is no longer a consideration.

It is a necessity.

cracks

(Then)

There are cracks in the Ministry.

Harry Potter shatters them wide open. And like an earthquake spreading from a faultline the whole place *falls* .

*

The Ministry alarms are blaring.

Ron doesn't even know what they all mean. Nobody does. The Ministry is in chaos. Something broke in the bowels of the building and now the world is crumbling apart. The magic that has been sunk into the foundations for years shakes and uproots. Wards and protective enchantments spark and fail.

The obliviators are screaming something about the Richter scale and the muggles finding out. Politicians are just screaming. People are fleeing. Some stay to try and weave the charms back together but they fizzle out almost instantly.

"Susan!" he calls, "Terry! Come and help me keep the corridors intact! We need to get everyone out!"

His fellow auror trainees follow his direction. They'd learned together, they all know they're competent. Terry starts weaving stationary charms on the walls while Susan directs people to the flumes. Someone tries to apparate and Ron watches as their body folds in on itself, the wards twisting them up and spitting them out in a bloody mess. He tastes bile in the back of his throat.

"No apparating!" he shouts, "And does anyone know what's going on?"

"One of the foundations blew," Zacharius Smith answers - an unpleasant Hufflepuff who somehow manages to remain strictly professional at work - he joins Terry in suspension and stationary charms. "The original ones that most of the Ministry spells are tied to. Stupidly. It could bring the whole place down. They'll be hard pressed to keep *this* under wraps."

(That's the idea. That's the plan. Harry shatters the archway that

keeps the Veil open and contained. As the stone crumbles the tear rips. The planes of existence slide over each other like tectonic plates of the earth grating against each other. No longer being pried open between walls of rock and magic, but the movement will shake the Ministry to its core.

Harry expects the earth to shift. He does not expect the tear to *rip* . A fragment of fabric from between the worlds detaches. A piece of shadow and the folds of the universe; hunger and emptiness and the gap between all things. Hollow and empty and depression and the screams of the damned tears away to *consume* .)

They're just about getting control of the earth shakes when the dementors appear. Two people fall before they even realise.

Ron's jack russell terrier springs into being. There's a robin from Smith that flutters to life and a prancing antelope of some kind from Susan. The wave of black cloaked dementors fall back, circling around them instead to pick other victims.

"Why are they attacking?" Susan looks pale, "Where did they come from?"

"They're not under Ministry control," Terry notes, summoning a wild boar patronus. The two that had been besieging their team fall back and they all breathe.

For a moment.

From the stairs and elevators the shadows grow long, forming into more dementors. They join their fellows who had been forced back and drift ominously closer. Less deterred by the patronus now, it's not until the boar and antelope dart forward together that they draw back.

"They're attacking!" Susan is pale-faced, "They're--" her gaze is fixed on where someone lies, eyes to the ceiling, body still. Their chest breathes but their gaze is blank. Lifeless.

Ron feels suddenly and violently sick. He turns away, just to see another four or five black eldritch horrors move forwards against the patroni. Susan looks alarm, and her antelope stumbles backwards too.

Harry is there suddenly. Messy black hair and green eyes, he twists on his feet with all the grace of a big cat and the silence of someone who doesn't really exist. Ron barely sees him cast but suddenly his stag is there, huge and magnificent and shaggy coat like feathers as it gores a

dementor straight through where it's heart should be.

Susan and Smith cheer. Harry is their leader. He's the one who taught them the spell. To see him there is galvanising. They rally and their spells grow brighter with success.

He looks rough, bleeding from a cut on his forehead. He looks like he's crawled out of a pile of rubble. "Harry?" Ron asks, "What are you *doing* here?"

"Interview," Harry says, "Was a floor or two down when the Ministry shattered. The wards breaking threw me out in the Misuse of Magic Department."

"Be careful apparating. I saw someone get turned inside out trying."

Harry hums in acknowledgement, "Zach, I need you on the flanks. Terry, keep those spells up, Ron--"

He falls into the role of leader like he was born to it. The team listened to him, instinct from school. Several others appear - also ex-students Harry has taught. Robards - Ron's boss - appears in a whirl of red auror robes. "Push forwards!" he says, "Drive them back so the curse breakers can get to the ward stones!"

Another rumble and the floor jerks beneath Ron's boots. It steadies then, suddenly, and across the Atrium he spots Dumbledore standing, robes a lilac purple and white beard long. He has his arms outstretched, directing his magic straight into the Ministry to keep it intact. The cracks that had been slowly spreading across the ceiling slow.

(In the chaos Dumbledore spots Harry. The glint of glasses, the messy black hair. And then he loses sight of him as Harry vanishes with Robards and the auror team to drive back the dementors.)

(He finds out later that Harry Potter had been in the Department of Mysteries for a job interview they'd already cancelled. The coincidence is noted. By then it is too late)

"Who here can cast a patronus?" Robards asks, "Grey, Montgomery get back to the Atrium, for Merlin's sake, Weasley, how come all your year can cast corporeal patroni?"

"Harry taught us," Susan says, even as Prongs tosses two aside.

Another shake, despite Dumbledore holding the weight of the building up now.

“We need to clear the dementors so they can fix the spells!” Harry says, ignoring Robards entirely. The head auror barely appears to notice. “We can take a small team down!”

Robards doesn’t even argue. He doesn’t have a patronus out. That speaks volumes.

They fall into following Harry. The start of the future, born here. Silver animals flank them. They don’t try the elevator - that was the first thing to go when the spells started falling. They take the stairs, one level at a time.

One dementor is a problem.

Twenty dementors is devastation.

Uncontrolled, unshackled there are soulless bodies in their wake. Twenty is also an underestimation. There are *hundreds* of the things.

Terry stumbles, tears springing to his eyes as his boar stutters. Ron drags him up, “Come on,” he says, “You’ve got this. *Expecto Patronum* .”

His pulse races in his chest. He’s sweating. His wand is glued to his hand. He is running on adrenaline and whatever happy memory he can scrounge together. His footsteps thunder on the floor as they drop down another level.

They’re nearing the bottom level of the Ministry, Ron realises.

“There are so many,” Susan mutters, looking despairingly at the corridor. It’s like halloween decorations strewn up, but they’re black and made of smoke and exude horror and fear. “I can’t… I don’t know if I can hold my patronus much longer…”

Harry pauses a few steps ahead of them. “Turn back,” he says, “I’ll sort it.”

Terry’s boar looks half-present. Ron’s own terrier has its tail flagging. Only Harry’s stag stands strong. “Don’t be stupid,” Smith says, his robin fluttering around his head.

“They’re not coming from where the wards shattered,” Harry says, “I

think something is summoning them from elsewhere. There are more further on and you're all flagging. You need to clear the way to the rune stones."

"You're not leaving us," Ron snaps to his best friend.

Harry takes a few steps, "Go!" he insists, twisting to them, the hollows of his face lit by the silver of his patronus, "I'll hold them off."

"Harry, no!" Ron feels bleakness, and he knows it's the dementors, knows it's the black cloaks that drift near his terrier and occasionally lunge towards him and the others, but he can't help but feel like there's no hope left. "Even you can't hold back that many."

Harry meets his gaze with the expression of one who doesn't really expect to look at him again.

Dementors are depression made reality. They are the death of hope. The thought of seeing each other again does not exist at that moment. He is beaten resignation and acceptance that this will be his end.

He holds that to his chest the way Harry shoulders everything - like a bitter pill already swallowed and doesn't flinch from his task, "I can try. One last run."

And before Ron can protest Harry throws a jinx at his friend, knocking Ron back, away from him as he turns to the final twist of the corridor. For a moment he stands there, stag at his shoulder, tines of bone leaving white wisps in the air. Ron takes a single step forwards.

Then Harry throws the blasting curse into the corridor behind him, bringing the ceiling down even as he steps into the horde of black.

"Harry!" Ron screams, clawing at the rubble. Too slow. Too late. (He will never forgive himself for that.) Instead he is left to the sight of his friend vanishing into blackness and collapsing rubble burned into his nightmares.

*

Harry is trapped in darkness. Cloaks like ink swirling in water around him, like the cloying soil of his own grave pressing down.

Prongs is there, Harry's fingers fist in the thin fur.

He's fading.

He breathes in and he is breathing in his grief at Sirius' death. He breathes out and it's those lonely night in his cupboard. He blinks betrayal at fights with his friends. His heart thuds the devastation of Dumbledore's inaction.

He is going to die, he thinks, surrounded by despair, cloying and claustrophobic. Prongs *flickers* .

A dementor swoops down. It presses against the rapidly dimming light. Prongs rears up only to stumble. Hooves clatters uneasily, head shaking from side to side uneasily. The spell gives another flicker as Harry hears Lily's scream and James' shout. Dead before he even knew them. The death of a possibility he never even knew.

He brings his hand to Prongs' muzzle as if to calm to stag before it dies. Another swoop of black and he feels claws in his shoulder. The stag presses its great muzzle to his chest, as if in apology. The sensation is muffled, the stag muzzling something soft in the pocket of Harry's jacket.

More claws. Two dementors flank him, and one presses forwards. Fingers catch his cheek before silver tines, barely there, knock them aside. The movement blurs the stag and when Harry blinks it's the image of a dying Slytherin on the bathroom floor and when he opens his eyes the stag is gone.

His fingers claw at the air where Prongs had been. Panic twists sharp and sour into fear. The primal sort that sends children beneath the covers, adults into corners, soldiers into battle numbness. The pads of his fingers curl around something silver. For a moment he thinks it's the silver of his patronus, but as it slips between his fingers he realises it's his invisibility cloak.

A piece of darkness detaches itself from the shadows around him and now, unimpeded, it reaches for his throat. Bony fingers curl around his neck and cup his cheek. Skin like sandpaper, thorns lining its metacarpals digging in. Blood wells up. More fingers reach for his face. His jaw. His mouth.

The hood lowers. Blackness. A void with too many teeth, shark and wolf fangs and leech jaws and the rough many facets of a geode cut open. Harry sees his end in that maw.

No.

He *refuses.*

He is *not* done.

" *Expecto Patronum* ," he says, wand in his hand, cloak wrapped through his fingers.

It is not Prongs who appears to save him now. Prongs is gone. Prongs is dead and drained. *Expect protection.* His father has been dead for eighteen years. He can't protect Harry any more.

Silver bursts from his wand. Like a knife blade it slices straight through the dementor. Its shriek is chalk on a chalkboard, nails grating over stone. The silver slices through, small and sharp like a blade boomeranging around. Harry is released with a throw, tossing him back. He skids in the dirt and around him silver spins, small and winged. His heart flutters in time with the wing beat, and even draped in silver he can see two eyes patterned onto fragile wings.

The moth flutters down. It holds none of Prongs' magnificence, as yet it shines just as brightly. Shimmering wings, patterned kaleidoscope as it drifts like a leaf. It settles on his clenched fist for a moment, flight stilling, and then it flutters back up.

He thinks Remus mentioned once that his mother's patronus had been a doe, to match his father's stag. But he also remembers finding a memory in an open pensieve during a detention of a red haired girl with his eyes folding a flower into a moth and watching it fly away into the sky.

(Snape had nearly skinned him alive but it was worth it, for that memory.)

Now the moth flutters up to the sky and the dementors fall back. Harry steps through the gaps where they had been. His moth is a beacon in the darkness. Silver against black, and through the light it gives off he finds the tear of the Veil.

There are still dementors ripping their way into existence from it. Years and years of nothing bricked closed by stone and magic. Still, they shy away from his moth. It is not a memory, it simply is. It exists. Not even despair can quench that.

In front of him the rip between worlds hangs. Shimmering and glistening. Iridescent where it bleeds from invisible edges he can’t see. Freed from its constraints it’s less of a doorway and more of an optical illusion. If looked at from the right direction it looks like a crack in the world. At another angle you can see right through to the plane of

the dead.

It flickers and the edges blur. He watches as a piece tears away. Little bits of nothing being born as soul sucking monstrosities.

Harry reaches out.

His hand is cold. His breath fogs. A dementor swoops down only to be repelled by a flap of the moth's wings.

His fingers touch the edge of the world. It's razor sharp and impossibly smooth. It burns and is cold to touch. His fingertips blacken from the point of contact. He has his wand in his right hand, his fingers pinching together the tear with his other.

And slowly…

Agonisingly…

He presses the world back together.

*

Ron watches Harry dive into a sea of dementors. He does not expect to see his friend again. At least not alive. At least not whole - soul intact and still breathing. When the rubble is clear he is first in to survey the damage, terrier trotting at his heels.

He almost misses Harry's body at first. He's too busy taking in the scene. The rubble *mess* that is the Ministry. The shrouds of smoke and cloth that lie drifted across the scene like torn banners of a fallen army. The remnants of dementors, he realises. Harry's patronus must have torn them to shreds.

A flutter of silver. He turns, catching sight of an insect. A butterfly, he thinks. He draws closer.

No.

A moth.

(It is a giant silk moth, they will look up later. They have poison laced through their bristles. An eye pattern etched into the wing blinking out death at those around it.)

It drifts down to rest on a still form.

Harry is breathing when Ron gets there. He's cold under Ron's touch as he shakes him. His skin has a dozen fine silver scars that look like they're years old and not scars from the past hour. He waits for the dead gaze of the soulless, the empty shell of his friend to stir.

The eyes that open are dazed, but they focus on Ron. Green shimmering silver. "Mate?" Ron asks, half hopeful, half scared. "Harry?"

There's a groan. And then a voice, speaking up weakly. "Never doing that again," Harry mutters.

Ron's fingers clench in Harry's sleeves and he rocks forwards, forehead dropping onto Harry's shoulder. "You're crazy," he says, "You Merlin-damned crazy bastard, I thought you were dead."

A soft huff that might be a laugh.

"The Association will be so glad you're alive," Ron says, slumping back, "If you'd died--" He rocks back, uncurling from where he had collapsed around Harry. "Let's go tell the others--"

"Ron," Harry twists, half-propping himself up on one elbow. His tone has Ron freezing, "Wait. Don't tell them."

"Harry?"

"We can use this. Just… do you trust me?"

The easiest question. One Ron has known the answer to since he first sat down beside a scrawny bespectacled orphan on the train eight years previously. They'd had some ups and downs but that road had brought them here.

To Ron crouched next to his near-dead friend about to come up with a plan that is insane at its core.

"I trust you," he says, grabs Harry's hand in his and jumps right off that cliff with him.

*

(Faking your death is easier than it should be.)

*

(Now)

Summer arrives insidiously. The school had a level of tension it had not had earlier. There are aurors in the halls patrolling. The students whisper. They stare at Tom and he tries not to look like he knows that they're staring at him.

Dumbledore watches him. He tries to pretend he doesn't know this either.

They announce Umbridge had a tragic accident. They do not openly announce the symbol of the Reaper - the moth's eye - burned into the floor around her. Certainly nobody speaks to Tom about it although word must have gotten out because people know.

Arcturus already watched him with respect, now there is a measure to every interaction. His head has that half-bow to it, and he won't meet Tom's gaze. Avery and Nott look awed - like he has saved them all over again. Lucretia and Flora just look wary and Bellatrix Black looks at him with something that is either adoration or obsession.

Nobody has a clue, Tom thinks. Whatever they think - they're wrong. He feels like he's on the verge of understanding. The brink of… something.

He returns to London with the knowledge about horcruxes floating in his head and the vision of Umbridge dead at Harry's feet. The wizard who is trapped on a different plane. The wizard who kills without hesitation to protect others. The wizard who has spent five years teaching Tom magic beyond the Hogwarts' curriculum.

The wizard who burned the Reaper's symbol into the stone of Hogwarts. He is the curse of the Defence position made physical; the opera's phantom conducting his orchestra of blood and frost and chaos. More ghost than person. More legend than man. He is elusive to even Tom after Umbridge's death. Harry does not appear to him in the last few weeks of term. The sheer amount of energy he'd forced through the planes of existence to wrap his magic around flesh had exhausted him. Tom has not seen a single sign of him since.

He should not be doing this, he thinks. He should not be stepping through old wooden doors with frosted glass. He should not be helping the murderous phantom that has haunted his education.

But he does. He's always been curious. And smart. He knows the answer but still he wants to check a theory.

The shop is old. Every wooden surface is stained grey with dust until

it looks almost grey-scale and dull. Even the shopkeeper is grey, a part of the scenery, bland and thinning around the edges. He looks up at Tom as the bell jingles, a flat, dull sound.

“Mr Riddle,” he says. Tom’s footsteps stumble to half a beat before his pace smooths out. He doesn’t ask how the man knows his name. The wandmaker has the air of someone who just…knows things.

“Mr Olivander,” he greets, cordially, “I’m here to purchase a wand.”

“You’re here a few years later than I expected,” his eyes are small, beetle black and they are just dark, glinting iridescent wings that glint at him in curiosity. “I was told Albus gave you a wand when he gave you your letter. It works well for you? The yew?”

Tom nods. It has never wavered. He has never thought to look for another, the wand that has been with him since he was born.

“I had always wondered,” Olivander hums, “It left my shop nearly three decades ago. So eager to be out there. Such temperament to it. And it did such great things. Great… but terrible…” he presses his glasses up his nose, “But now, to you. Something paired to you - let’s see what I can find. There must be something--” and suddenly he is a whirlwind of movement. He moves nimbly for such an old man, appearing here and there and grabbing boxes from the shelf at seemingly random.

He reappears with a stack of boxes at least five inches higher than his head. He drops half and deposits the rest on the desk before snatching one and shoving it at Tom.

“Dragon heart-string and maple, fourteen inches, rigid-- oh no, no that’s not right--”

He barely lets Tom touch the box, let alone the wood before he’s pulling it away.

“This is a peruvian vipertooth string, yew, twelve inches, firm and yet supple-- no, no, no. Here: unicorn tail-- no, never mind, phoenix feather and cedar? Hmm… I wonder--”

Tom’s fingers are stinging. Some of the wands feel cold. Some feel like biting stings from nettles in the undergrowth. Their magic clashes and the dissonance between some of them and him is obvious. Olivander does not seem perturbed by the way he goes through twenty boxes in minutes. Instead he peers over at him, looking almost eager.

“A tricky customer, huh? Wonderful!” he seems oddly thrilled by this. Tom is about to continue, to go for the next box when Olivander snatches it from him, “No, no, you have been claimed by a wand, they sense it, they will not bond but perhaps--” he leans up into Tom’s face. Tom resists the urge to lean away. “Hmm.”

Then he’s gone and Tom can hear boxes rummaging in the back. He is, suddenly, acutely aware of the icy presence of Harry, slipping into existence behind him. He doesn’t say anything. Neither does Harry. He twists his neck, and Harry is leaning up against a desk piled with wands. Pale. More translucent than normal. Just watching.

Olivander reappears, plucking off the lid and offering the wand to Tom. Tom doesn’t look at him, gaze still locked with Harry. The wood he plucks from the tissue paper is smooth. Warm beneath his fingers. A quiet hum in the air, a tinnitus to his ears, and there’s a curl of something that feels like ice wrapping around his hand. It burns cold. It should be unpleasant.

It’s not.

Olivander’s sigh is so gentle it could be paper rustling or the wind in the trees. “Holly,” he says, and Tom finally breaks Harry’s gaze to look at the pale wood. “Eleven inches. Phoenix feather.”

“Yes,” Tom says, needlessly. Everyone in the room already knows this is the one.

The wand drops back into the box, pale wood, barked ridges to it vanishing as the wandmaker starts to wrap the purchase, “Phoenix feather suggests a more intuitive form of casting. More emotional.” A beat. “More powerful.” Olivander fixes Tom with a fixed stare, “It promises great things, Mr Riddle. And this phoenix in particular… it gave me one other feather. Brother wands are a rare thing.”

“Who has the other wand?” Tom asks, but he already knows the answer.

“It paired with a youthful yew branch I found in a graveyard in Yorkshire. A young boy bought it at eleven. An orphan… and with such potential. And such devastation.” And then Olivander’s gaze flickers. It’s only for a fraction of a moment, but Tom tracks the movement. Heart thudding. He watches as Olivander looks straight at where Harry perches and then away again, “And now you hold it. The wand of the Reaper in the hands of his vanquisher.”

Tom breathes in the confirmation he had already known.

That's my wand, a memory he had forgotten stirs, the image of a boy with green eyes says, leaning over a desk in front of Tom at eleven.

This is the wand the Dark Lord used, Dumbledore says, handing it over to him.

Harry standing over Umbridge's body as his magic licked frostbite and the symbol of the Reaper - his symbol - into the floor around her.

A part of Tom had always known. Always been peripherally aware of it but acknowledging it, giving words to the facts he has never chosen to put together. He hands over the galleons and takes the wand.

His wand.

Harry's wand.

He has them both. Brother wands, one for each of them. One the murderer. The other the would-be murdered.

"I'm keeping the yew," he says, half to Olivander, but mostly to the Dark Lord leaning on the desk watching him with those silvery-sheened eyes, present but not, just as he has been for the past few years.

"Of course," Harry accepts, "It's yours. You won it. Fair game." A pause. "Then the holly for me?"

Olivander draws back a little at hearing him speak but doesn't look in the spot Harry is sitting in again. If he can see the other he makes no recognition of it, head down, turning back to his ledgers as Tom turns, stalking for the exit.

"Having two wands has its uses," he says, "I might just keep it." Spiteful. Petty. He doesn't turn to Harry. Doesn't even look at him.

The Dark Lord is not on this plane of existence. He cannot hurt Tom. Not really.

(Except he can, Tom thinks of a dead body choking on mercury and frost biting her flesh.)

He can feel Harry's magic welling, collecting like frost spreading over the ground. It's dulled. The memory of winter when spring has sunk its warmth into the ground. Harry's whole form slides to transparency

as Tom stalks past the phantom memory, barely clinging to significance. The shadow of the Dark Lord shifts, temper brittle even as Tom pulls open the door to the shop. “Tom,” he chides, “Who did you think you were helping all these years? Why did you think it was you who could see me?”

The bell clanks as he turns in the open doorway to face Harry, “I was helping myself,” he says, “You’re forgotten. History clinging to significance. But I?” even through the packaging he can feel the warmth of the holly wand, the phoenix feathers almost singing in the periphery of his hearing, “I’m going to be better than you ever were. One day they will fear to speak my name.”

Harry stills. The Reaper stills. Murderer. Dark Lord. Terrorist. “If you betray me,” he says, “I will kill you.”

Tom laughs, “You tried to kill me before I was born and didn’t manage it,” he says, “Sixteen years caged and you’re not anymore threatening than you were. I think I’ll survive.” And then he twists away, door closing behind him. The bell clunks. Ringing a single, muted toll on his accidental partnership with the once Dark Lord.

father

It's like a fairytale, if you tell it right.

Once there was a wizard who was a hero. A Gryffindor, brave and strong. And on the day the Ministry fell he went to save them all. And he did. He paid the highest price for it. He died.

Except he didn't.

The hero rises again. To some he is just a shadowed figure with a vision. To others they glimpse the man behind the mask and they *trust* . He's a good person. He wants equality. He wants magic to *thrive* . He wants a new world for their children. Where everyone would be free and nobody had to hide. He holds out his hand offering this new world. It is not a retreat. It is their *Empire* .

Some take it and run. Others laugh at him. But this is not a question. Not really.

It's all or none and he will bring them there kicking and screaming if required.

He is their Reaper and he has come to lead them to the next life.

*

Hogwarts' library is vast and deep. Tom is pretty sure he has not found the ends of it. It's probably the biggest source of knowledge in Britain, if not a large part of Europe. He is not surprised this book was found in its depths, but he is surprised that Dumbledore has not yet found it and confiscated it.

'The Secret of the Darkest Arts' is bound in human skin with whole passages scribed in what he is pretty sure is blood. The rituals are vile. The spells have no other purpose than to hurt and to hurt *well* .

Tom *drinks* it down.

And between the pages, between a diagram that depicts how to skin a human alive and leave their organs perfectly preserved and a spell that could be used to heal, or it could be used to slowly unravel the cells until someone is bleeding into absent-ness - he finds it. The theory he had found proven. Written in neat, perfect cursive.

It *is* possible to split the soul.

It has risks. But doesn't any significant action hold risks? Doesn't any path to greatness have twists in the road? He could just as soon lose his soul to a dementor - get it snatched up from a passing eldritch entity and munched on like a passing snack. This process too, could leave him soulless. A drooling shell.

The benefit is worth it.

Sixteen is not seventeen and it is not freedom from the Trace. That's okay - he can circumvent that with a second wand and opportune casting. It is a certain disregard for his whereabouts from the orphanage. Well… almost…

He dodges the shadowy stalkers he's pretty sure Dumbledore has set to watch him. They're neither subtle nor very hidden in the middle of muggle London. A teacher was found dead with the Reaper's symbol burned into the floor by her corpse. Tom's not meant to know that. But he's sure that is what has the old man wary and watchful.

The Reaper won't hurt him, Tom thinks. The Reaper *saved* him.

Harry saved him.

His thoughts about the wraith twist and turn. He keeps expecting to feel the bitter sting of betrayal but it doesn't come. A part of Tom had always known. Had always been aware of the fact Harry was *something* else.

Someone else.

How many not-ghosts existed advocating murder on a regular basis?

Except to acknowledge it. To give words to the truth. It lended weight to the facts that he can no longer escape.

Harry was better than the others. *Special* . He had proven himself Tom's equal, watched over and guided him and when it had come to it he'd kill for Tom.

He killed Umbridge for Tom.

Harry has told him a lot over the years. He has never directly lied to Tom. Told him half-truths. Lied to him by omission but never outright told him mistruths. He has never presented himself as anything other

than what he was.

Tom had been the one to wilfully blind himself. Better, he had thought, to have this wizard share his secrets and teach him without asking who or why or what. Because to confront those questions is to confront a hundred others just like it. Because to confront those questions is to draw a line in the sand and pick where he is standing.

Dumbledore sometimes looks at him like he expects Tom to save the world. Dumbledore doesn't know him very well, Tom thinks. He knows himself well enough to know that he is nobody's saviour. Except, maybe, for the one person who has already spilled blood in Tom's protection.

Dumbledore knew Harry once too. He didn't know that boy very well either, and Tom wonders what the old man would think to know the Reaper had been under his nose this whole time: an invisible world away.

*

It's a wet summer. He doesn't own an umbrella and he's dripping when he slips onto the train after giving his tail the slip. The train is stuffy and the air humid with water pooling from coats and shoes. There are no seats on the journey north so he stands by the doors amidst luggage piles and a screaming baby in a pushchair. Three hours in he departs at Leeds for the bus station. He cannot take the Night Bus. Quick it might be, he cannot leave a record of visiting here. Not after what he's planning.

The bus is rickety and the driver might be drunk. He hits a pot-hole going at forty miles an hour and the whole steel frame gives a godawful lurch and crack, as if it might come apart at the seams. It sets Tom's teeth on edge.

He sits on the edge of faded fabric that smells like humanity. An old lady had a shopping trolley. There are some rowdy school kids in the back. The route is just windy enough he cannot read comfortably. His orphanage-given muggle clothes itch and fit poorly.

In his bag are two wands of holly and yew. An invisibility cloak also lies folded within. His new book acquisition and some other needed supplies also lie within along with a scrawled address he'd been forced to dig out of some old record books.

The Gaunt House, Little Hangleton, North Yorkshire.

The bus does not go to Little Hangleton. It stops at Great Hangleton and Tom departs. He watches as it trundles away, swerving around a pheasant that suicidally decides to step into the road. It's dry up here. Cloudy, faintly warm, like the sun has left an after-impression of summer upon the country lanes and hedgerows he is forced to walk down.

There's a fancy house on the hill when, after a walk of another two-hours or so, he finally reaches the smaller village. It overlooks the small streets of clustered cottages and graveyard that stretches along the edge of the village. It is near here that he finds the Gaunt House.

'House' is generous.

Ramshackled, a single story building that looks like it's barely three rooms big. The garden is a choking mass of vines and weeds. Some stir as he walks along the path, magic pulsing in them, but they make no move to attack Tom.

Pinned to the door is a dead snake.

His hands fist, hovering in the air, hesitating for a moment. Then he knocks.

*

Morfin Gaunt was born and raised in Little Hangleton. A Hogwarts letter had come for him - much like it came for his sister several years after him. His father - who had gone to Hogwarts and not thought much of the population they accepted through their doors - had refused to let Morfin or Merope attend.

He'd taught himself from books and from his father's tutelage. Merope knew even less, the girl quiet and timid in the presence of Marvolo's fury and rages and her brother's almost childish cruelty. But her fingers danced around a cauldron's edge and her eyes watched the handsome muggle pass by the window.

Now a mimicry of that handsome muggle knocks on the door with Gaunt eyes and a wand in his hand.

"Uncle," he greets Morfin. Marvolo is gone. Dead in prison for at least a decade now. Morfin is a pale shadow of what the Gaunt house once were. Balding, eyes rheumy and teeth yellowed. Hisses slip between split lips more easily than English.

“Oh,” he sneers at Tom, “‘Er spawn survived, did ya?”

“I thought that was the whole point of me,” Tom mocks, stepping forwards and forcing the older man back to let him in. Morfin is not intimidating. He is not a threat. He does not move to posture over Tom, but neither does he welcome his nephew. The inside of the shack looks exactly how you might expect from the outside. There is no facade of spells, no magic permeating the walls. It has leaked out leaving the soil stained floorboards dull, the walls peeling and the sink grotty and filled with stained dishes. It’s the house of someone who has long stopped caring.

“Boy-who- *survived* ,” Morfin mocks, “While she died, ‘er filthy halfblood kid lives? Unfair that. Whaddya want?”

Tom takes in the house. His uncle. The legacy of the Gaunts buried in the dirt. Why *was* he here? He had known, theoretically, that the Gaunts had fallen. His mother was dead. His uncle was mad and unfit to raise Tom. There was no inheritance from his mother’s side… but to actually *see* it?

He tugs the locket out from where it hangs around his neck. The emerald scaled snake hisses to him, soothing and mindless. Morfin goes as stiff as a pointer dog when he lays eyes on it. “Where dya get tha’? Didya steal it?”

“Steal ?” Tom hisses back, parseltongue leaving his own mouth as if responding to the hissing locket, “It was my mother’s. Slytherin was *my* ancestor too, *uncle* .”

Morfin spits and mutters something that is neither parseltongue nor English. He paces around a ragged sofa and picks up a mug so caked in tannin Tom’s not sure it was ever any colour but brown. He does not offer Tom anything as he pours what could be tea or could be whiskey into the cup. “She *degraded* us,” he snarls, “Sleepin’ wiv that muggle. Riddle. Fancy bastard.” He eyes up Tom with rheumy eyes, “Whaddya called? Didshe name ya before they dragged ye from her dead corpse?”

Merope had never been alive to see him born to the world. “They found the name ‘Tom’ scrawled in potion books she owned,” Tom says. He does not own these books. He is not that sentimental and he knows the books were ruined anyway.

He has not sat down. There’s a moth-eaten sofa and rickety chairs that look like they will collapse if he breathes on them too hard. He steps

across floorboards that are broken and gape like a hungry mouth, ready to swallow, stepping to the window that looks out over the road and graveyard beyond.

“What happened?” Tom asks, looking through, “When she died? Why did he attack you?”

“Who?”

Tom clicks his tongue. A slow, measured thing, a metronome echoing in the dingy shack. “You *know* who,” he says.

He tries to imagine it. Harry appearing wreathed in a cloak of invisibility and the Reaper’s mask. A shadow in the night. And Morfin spitting and hissing insults. His mother scared and clutching her pregnant belly to her.

“Reaper,” Morfin shudders, “Blasted necromancer. *World breaker,”* he hisses, and the translation is rusty, the parseltongue not having an English equivalent Tom can equate it to. World serpent. The bringer of tides. He who devours. The parseltongue hiss likens it to the shedding of scales, the ending of the old to bring forth something new. There is no English word that exists that quite puts forth the simultaneous finality and rebirth in that word. “I duelled ‘im in the graveyard. Didn’ stan’ a chance. ‘E knocked me out. When I woke up Merope was dead and the Ministry was swarmin’ all over. Took stuff as *evidence. Stole it.* Stole tha’ locket,” he eyes it up, greedily.

Tom turns from the graveyard view to look at Morfin. The man’s hissing to an adder he’s pulled out his pocket. Crooning hisses. Tom almost wishes he’d brought Nagini, if only to prove his bloodline. But he didn’t want to run the risk of the man having an innate ability to charm her away from him.

“Tha’ locket is ours. Gaunts. Generations ‘ave ‘ad it. No more Gaunts now though’, no Gaunts left,” Morfin starts laughing. He doesn’t stop. The noise is grating. The breaking of bones punched down under the weight of stone.

“Do we have any other heirlooms?” Tom asks, “Or were they all pawned away to afford this hovel or stolen?”

“Some books, some *secrets* but they’re gone. Destroyed, stolen, *robbed*, because they think they’re *better than us, that we’re fallen, the Gaunts are gone,* are we gone, li’halfblood? Do I look *gone*? Does *Peverell’s* ring look *gone*?” He gestures angrily, stumbling to his feet. Tom doesn’t

move as the man stumbles close. His eyes are fixed on the golden ring studded with a black stone.

“Is that what he wanted?” Tom asks, greedily. To be confronted by proof of something he has sought, another fragment of his inheritance, “When he attacked you and my mother?”

“‘E wanted the ring,” Morfin spits, “Peverell’s Ring.”

“Why?” Tom asks. He knows this already. But the reasoning still escapes him, “It’s just an old heirloom.” He tilts his head, eyeing up the ugly stone ring on Morfin’s finger.

“It’s from Cadmus Peverell,” Morfin sneers, “‘E and ‘is brothers - didn’ya ‘ear? Don’ you know? They were *necromancers* . It’s in our blood, jus’ like snake charming is, so is the death magic.”

“Does that…” Tom’s mind races, “Does that make *him* a Peverell?”

He’s not. Harry’s a Potter. But while his mother might have been muggleborn - his father was pureblood. Generations going back. Tom had not thought to trace back *Harry’s* family tree - to find the connection, to dig out the magic that ran in Harry’s veins. *In the Reaper’s veins.*

Morfin shrugs, “‘E’s dead,” he spits, “Why’s it matter?”

He’s not dead, Tom thinks. He’s trapped between planes of existence. He’s caged himself from the world bound in magic and universal trappings. He exists as little more than a wraith leaving imprints like fingerprints. And sometimes…

Sometimes he leaves claw marks: he thinks of Umbridge’s frostbitten body and the tangy ozone of magic burned out. Harry is a tidal wave and the breakwater will only hold out for so longer. With or without Tom’s help Harry will claw his way back. Either that or Granger-Weasley will finally figure it out and bring her lord back.

When that moment comes Tom can be Harry’s ally or his enemy.

His fingers dance over the locket around his neck. In his hand sits a holly wand warm with a phoenix core. It has never tasted Harry’s magic, and yet the holly reminds him of the wraith. Its wood is cool, the sharp tang of winter red berries covered in frost.

“The ring,” he says, “Give it to me.”

It's his by birthright. It's his by blood and magic and inheritance. Besides. He might need it to undo whatever mess Harry did to end up trapped in the ethereal plane to start with.

"You? Li' halfblood upstart?" Morfin snorts, "Impure spawn. Gimme the locket and git. Nothin' for posh muggle spawn like yourself here. You're not a Gaunt."

" *Aren't I?"* Tom hisses. Morfin's eyes narrow. He goes for his wand.

Morfin is fast.

Tom is faster.

" *Imperio* ," he says. The holly listens to him the way Harry listens to him. With a focus and intensity that makes him feel *seen* and understood, feel *known* . The spell is cast before he even finishes the incantation. *"Give me the ring."*

Morfin's eyes are glazed. The ring slides off his dirty fingers and drops into Tom's hand. A gold band with imperfections from the years. An ugly black stone with a carving dug into the black. It looks a little like an eye.

It looks a little like the Reaper's symbol.

His curse slips in the realisation. Morfin jerks against the imperius and the holly flashes out. Morfin is blasted backwards. It had been instinctual. Tom had not even uttered an incantation. His uncle hits a dresser that is already missing a door and held together with four nails. He lands heavily, groaning.

"I'm a Gaunt, same as you," Tom says, "And despite my blood I'm *better* than you. Don't get in my way."

Morfin spits blood, "Jus' like 'im. Look pretty but vicious when upset. Merope *crawled back.* Abandoned and in tears because he *didn't love 'er* . You look jus' like 'im. The muggle on the 'ill. Named for 'im and everything. She insisted she'd call ye' Tom for yer father and Marvolo for our father. An' you say you're a Gaunt. You're just a mudblood spawn."

Tom freezes. The words don't register and then they do. The implications. *You look just like him* .

(Name him Tom for his father, I hope he looks like him .)

For a moment the world hangs by a thread, spun silken and dizzyingly rotating on its axis and then--

Tom breathes in and it stops, gravity returning with a rush of blood to his head and he feels steel in his spine and venom in his mouth. He twists to look down at where Morfin grovels, and in three words he damns himself, “The muggle *where* ?”

*

The ring is cold on his finger. Like ice. Like hoarfrost woven into a band in an eternal promise. It’s appropriate. Rings symbolise eternity don’t they?

This ring will symbolise his eternity.

What are you meant to do when you find out the truth you’ve grown up believing - you are an orphan, you are unwanted - is a lie?

He throws his mind back to try and remember if anyone had ever said his father was dead. A muggle - everyone knew that - a muggle surname, a lack of wizarding fathers stepping forwards to claim relation. But Merope had been with her brother. The assumption was that he were dead - nobody knew enough about how to interact in the muggle world to look for him, or to even consider--

They share a *name* . They share a face too.

Well.

Shared.

Tom has his father to thank for his good looks; his height and his pale skin and the way his hair curls slightly in the rain and flicks just over his eye. He has his father to thank for his poise and jawline and long fingers.

No, he corrects. *Had* .

Some wounds don’t ever heal. Some sit raw and festering and they sting but you forget about them. You learn to live with it. To cover it with bandages and soak it in murtlap essence and let other people cradle your hand and look at you with caring eyes and you allow yourself to feel like you’re something more. More than a no-name mudblood. More than a miracle boy-hero. More than an *orphan* .

Except he's not an orphan.

Well.

He is now.

Victory swells in his chest. Beautiful, bitter aconite in his veins as he walks the halls of the house that should have been his. The halls he should have grown up running through with paintings of people with his face and his hair and his jawline. Muggle - fine - but still his.

He was denied what he didn't even know he was owed and the fury had been blinding. The hot fire of phoenix fire. Some spells you have to *mean* and there was never any doubt that he did not mean it.

He'd intended to find a passing Muggle. Someone who wouldn't be missed. He did not intend to commit patricide.

But his father was there and he was convenient.

The halls are quiet. Polished hardwood floors squeak under his cheap, second-hand shoes. There's a stillness and silence in this fancy house now. Not even ghosts tread here. Tom stands, orphaned by choice, and he is alone. He stands at his moment of triumph with nobody to share it with.

The victory feels almost hollow without Harry there at his side.

The Reaper's words run through his mind. *No more bodies. Clean up after yourself* .

He looks out of the window to the hollow where he knows the Gaunt shack sits. Sometimes solutions just present themselves. How *convenient* . But first--

He walks the hollow halls to the drawing room. Death is clean. Death is simple.

Death will never come for him.

(He wonders what Harry will think about what he is about to do.

He decides he doesn't care.)

The blood is cooling. It is sticky and it does not spread to the symbols well. Ribs crack and he has to try and avoid getting blood on the human skin of the book propped open on the drawing room mantel. It

would not be misplaced. Human blood reuniting with human flash, even if it is not that flesh from which it came from originally.

It's not even complicated. It's easier than Tom imagines magic of this magnitude should be. He doesn't even worry that he'll mess up. The words fall off his tongue like raindrops, fresh and clear and pure and yet they're anything but.

There's a moment when he thinks that nothing happened. That he missed a component. That he didn't do it correctly - ridiculous, he's due to pass his OWLs with *Outstandings*, *of course* he did it right--

Then something inside him *tears* and the pain hits.

reaper

(Then)

He slaves over maps and scrying spells. Ron forgets, sometimes, how *obsessive* Harry gets over things.

“He’s a *rat* ,” Ron points out, “He could be *anywhere* .”

A week later George brings them an arm. “I recognised Scabbers, believe it or not. Never seen a rat look quite so fleabitten and near dead. Lee and I were tracking down some Grindelwald groupies. We got Carrow before someone started slinging blasting hexes. We flung out one of our portable swamps and then fished out the groupies who survived the explosions. But all we found of Pettigrew was an arm.”

“So he’s dead,” Ron reasons, “Nobody survives an explosion that takes off a whole limb.”

“He’s survived amputations before,” Harry still refuses to believe Pettigrew is dead. Stubborn to the extreme, Ron thinks, exchanging a glance with George.

Two days later the aurors find Pettigrew, body pale, surrounded by dementors and his chest *destroyed* .

*

"They said he was dead." Ginny says to Ron, one day, sidling up to him at an Association meeting. Her tone is quiet. Pensieve. Only for his ears. “I was devastated but not surprised. If anyone was going to go out in a blaze of glory fighting off a hundred dementors it was going to be him. A part of me always knew that; it was part of the reason we broke up.”

Ron watches Harry address the crowd. He’s *magnificent* . Charisma drips off him but in a manner that suggests he’s barely aware of it. He’s genuine ambition wrapped in kindness. A light in the dark that moths gather around. A forest fire that will engulf those around him until they burn with him.

“Is it bad?” his little sister continues in a tone of voice that makes him twist to read her expression, “Is it bad that there are times I think it would have been better if he had died?”

Ginny watches Harry the way one watches a funeral procession - the expression of one who has already mourned and accepted their loss. "It was his idea - to fake his death," Ron feels like he needs to defend himself, "He wants to change things but this world won't let him. Dumbledore won't let him. But if he can act from the shadows--"

"I know he's alive, I can see him there, living and breathing," her tone is wistful, "But it feels like he didn't return. Not all of him. It feels like he's still running out his time before death comes for him. Like death sent a shell of him back to us to play the reaper for our kind."

"He's still Harry," Ron says, not quite sure who he's trying to convince here.

"And isn't that the problem? We'd follow him anywhere."

Playing the reaper, Ron thinks, as he watches Harry move among their group. Support this, protest here, steal that. Harry has no presence anymore, instead he breathes through them.

There's a mask on the table. Sculpted in molten silver and shaped to fit the top of a face. No gaps for eyes, it's solid metal with patterns swirling over it. It covers the top of Harry's face when he wears it, leaving only lips and jaw visible. He does not wear it now - he does not need to. Those here know him too well to be deceived by a mask.

This group is trusted. This group - scattered members of their Hogwarts year group, friends and those who would stand beside them without faltering - look at Harry in wonder. Susan Bones keeps looking at Harry as if he might vanish between one blink and another. Terry Boot's gaze has been fixed on the silver lacerations that line Harry's jaw for the entirety of this meeting.

Harry died for them.

Harry was already popular and charming and kind. When they watch him throw himself into death's arms to save them and then walk away untouched that cultivates a presence some can only aspire to.

Ron feels that old stab of jealousy as he watches his friend address the crowd. He squashes it down, brutally. This is not something to be jealous of: the charismatic way in which people flock to him. Their bated breaths and hushed whispers as they hang onto his every word. Harry could ask them to jump and they'd ask how high.

Ron does not want that much power. He does not want that

responsibility.

“Magic is *dying* ,” Harry is appealing, “The number of intake on Hogwarts’ registry is half that of three decades ago. Birth rates are dropping. Mortality is increasing. The war *devastated* us.” He is not shouting but his voice travels. “And instead of celebrating magic, *preserving* magic the purebloods hoard their knowledge and the muggleborns are driven back to the muggles. When I found out about this new world I thought it would be something better. An *escape* . That people wouldn’t be ostracised for being different. Instead it’s more of the same.”

Next to him Ginny’s sigh is a quiet thing filled with wistfulness, “It seems so perfect. Muggleborn integration, bloodline magic legality, creature rights… he says we’re not fighting a war. But we are; we’re fighting *his* war. And it's going to get us all killed. He forgets that, I think. A part of him didn’t make it away from the dementors. A part of him is dead already."

Ginny's observations are too sharp. They make Ron itch in his skin, long to scratch himself flesh deep. "Would you do something else?" he asks, "Reshape yourself to fit into a world you know is dying. A world tearing itself apart? He's not wrong - he was just the first to do something. Tell me you didn't see him sixth year sitting in the Great Hall, back lined with bruises after his godfather died. Tell me you don't remember how he used to flinch when we hugged him. Tell me you don't remember him spending whole nights preparing an argument for the defence of an innocent man that he never got to use."

“I’m not saying he’s not got justification,” his sister argues, “But he’s dragging everyone else in with him.”

“Do you feel dragged? Do you feel forced to be here? Intimidated? Pressured?”

Her brown eyes are wide, guileless and *knowing* . The eyes of a deer when it spots the hunter and yet still refuses to run. “No,” she says, voice strong, “I’ll go to my death with eyes open. Fight the regime. And maybe one day we might see *his* dream realised and be able to rebuild a better world, a world away from this one.”

She never says his name, Ron will realise after. Harry becomes *Him* and *He* and Ron can hear the capitalisation. Ron thinks that she might have started it, one day, when Dean turns around to ask, “Is our

Reaper joining us?"

The name sticks.

*

(Now)

Tom has not seen Harry since the wand shop. He waits for the wraith to appear at the start of his sixth year but a week passes,and then another and Harry is still absent.

For possibly the first time since Tom has known Harry, he goes seeking the wraith out. He stalks down the halls of Hogwarts, Prefect badge gleaming as he fakes a patrol to wander the night corridors. Footsteps echo. The walls whisper softly to each other as he passes by, a secret preserved in the mortar.

Harry has his favoured haunts. They're high towers and upper floor windows - he used to fly, Tom remembers - and still he favours heights. Places with views of the castle and grounds. Places with open space, places with freedom.

(For a boy who grew up trapped in a dark cupboard he refuses to be trapped in the dark again.)

He locates the wraith on the seventh floor by a large window part-way towards the clock tower. He almost mistakes Harry for a student - Gryffindor robes and shoulders hunched in on himself as he twists his magic into a ghostly moth to flutter around him. Harry actually looks younger than Tom for a change. Younger, but still older, like a vicious gremlin he sits to one side, legs swinging. Like a child. A murderous child.

"You're the Reaper," Tom says. It doesn't come out as accusingly as he intends. A part of him had always known this.

Harry startles. Clearly he had never anticipated Tom seeking him out. His head snaps around, a soft, surprised noise slipping out as Tom drops down to sit next to him. The stone windowsill is cold.

The position is oddly reminiscent of when Harry first told him his name, six years prior. *' I have lots of names'* Harry had said.

"Yes," Harry says, "I lied only by omission, but I've never pretended to be anyone other than what I am. Whatever name you call me I have

never lied to you."

"You said I could see you because I was special. Because I was *better* than everyone else. Not because you botched a ritual when I was a baby and accidentally flung yourself into a different plane of existence."

Like coffee grounds burned to bitterness, Tom's tone is dark. Harry flinches, a little. He looks raw like this, young and unscarred. If Tom doesn't look too closely he can almost convince himself that Harry is just another student. That his edges don't blur and his eyes don't reflect silver in the wrong light.

"I should have known better," Tom says, "Dumbledore said you were *kind* . Did you enjoy it? Taking pity on the poor boy whose mother you killed?"

Seeker-deft fingers smooth out a crease in his robes. "I didn't lie where it mattered. You *are* better than them. It's not a question of power, it's just a matter of blood. It's not my fault you misinterpreted that. You were a power hungry eleven year old who thought he could make a bargain with *me* ," Harry's gaze flickers up, voice a scoff. Tom feels young suddenly, despite Harry looking visibly like a second or third year.

"Is that why I can see you?" Tom asks, "Because of our blood? Or because of your ritual?"

A shoulder shrugs, lazily, like it's barely worth the effort, "Blood will out," the Dark Lord drawls.

"I thought we were the same. Was I wrong?"

Harry twists to look at him. His scars shimmer over his face, silver claw marks in a mockery of lover's kisses over his jaw. A lightning bolt scar that still looks red and angry. Tom reaches for it.

"You got this from the ritual," he says. It's not a question. Harry is his usual ethereality under Tom's fingers but the air feels warm above the scar. The faintest hum of *power* the fold of a universe away. "You got this from *me* ." He can almost see the red threads stitched in and out of his flesh, entangling him with the other, "Out of all the people who could possibly help you there is only me. You *need* me, Harry Potter. It is blood and fate ordained."

Harry shakes his head, dislodging Tom's fingers from where they

hover above his forehead, “I don’t believe in fate,” he says.

“Do you believe in me?” Tom croons, “You need my help; I’ll give it. But I need you to tell me the truth.”

“The truth? A beautiful and terrible thing; it should be treated with *great* caution,” Harry tells him. There’s a mocking lilt to his words. They do not sound like his words at all, “What a tempting offer: the help of a sixteen year old.”

Tom does not embellish his offer. Harry already knows what his assistance is worth. In his pocket the holly wand feels warm. He can hear a phoenix singing at the edge of his hearing.

“No more hidden truths, Tom Riddle,” Harry says, and it feels like a promise. His hair is fluffy, and he runs his hand through it making it fluffier. “I will not be Albus Dumbledore stringing you along with half-answers. Ask your questions.”

“Why did you go after the Gaunts?”

Harry tilts his head. Like a bird, like a predator, eyeing him up. "I wanted your ring," he says, flatly.

He doesn't elaborate. Tom twists the ring on his finger. He'd asked Dumbledore this same question.

Dumbledore had lied. *An artefact* , he’d pondered and sidestepped around the answer he knew already.

Harry doesn’t try to lie.

“I see you have it,” Harry watches him twist the ring on his finger. It has been cold ever since the ritual. “Paid your uncle a visit, did you? All that effort I spent to track it down and in one summer you got it by *asking* nicely,” his tone is dark.

Tom’s smile matches it. Harry wanted the ring. And now Tom has turned the artifact of his desire into a horcrux.

It’s almost petty.

Harry sacrificed everything to try and get this. Now Tom has it. Tom has defiled it.

He’d like to see Harry try and use this to open a portal to a new world now.

Harry blinks, slowly, languidly, at him, as if sensing the venom in Tom's crooked smile. "How nicely did you ask?" he repeats.

"*Oh* so nicely," Tom's grin holds an edge of that madness Morfin held. "So you tried to kill the Gaunts for this pretty little trinket. Tried to kill *me* . My *mother* ."

An eye roll. Harry actually looks like a teenager for a moment, "I wasn't trying to *kill you* . Your mother was just there at the wrong time and the wrong place. Morfin - your uncle - was mad. Ranting and raving about the purity of the Slytherin line. I stunned him. Took the ring from him. Your mother watched as I set up my ritual. She watched as I took the ring. The Peverell Ring."

The faint press of cold skin on his, Harry's fingers curling around Tom's as he lifts the hand with the horcrux, "The Gaunts," he says, slowly, "Were descendants of Cadmus Peverell. And the stone set into this ring is a necromantic artefact capable of tearing spirits out of the Veil." His thumb brushes over Tom's knuckles but don't quite come into contact with the ring. Almost tenderly. "I was going to use it to tear an opening to a different realm."

Tom frees his hand, holding the hand with the ring to the light. The scratches that form that eye-like symbol. He thinks of Grindelwald's symbol. He thinks of the Reaper's symbol. Different iterations of the same images.

Harry traces through the air. It shimmers, fogging like breath on a cold autumn day. The image hovers there.

A line. A circle. A triangle. "A wand. A stone. A cloak."

" *The* cloak," Tom realises, "And this is the stone… what are they?"

"A children's fairy story. You never did read any of Beedle's children's fables. Something called the Deathly Hallows. An unbeatable wand. A stone to bring back the dead. And a cloak to hide you from death himself. I was looking for the stone and I found it." Harry laughs now, a self-deprecating thing, "Morfin and I fought, true, but he wasn't a challenge. Your mother even less so - she was practically a squib. I'd always been talented in duelling. And then I had the stone. Twist it three times and you can summon the spirits of the departed."

Tom slides it off his fingers but doesn't twist it. What use does he have to speak to the dead? But he can hear the longing in Harry's voice. Can hear the desperation, the desire, the *so close* need that must have

driven him all those years ago.

He lets the horcrux sit on his palm. He can hear the echoing hiss that sounds like parseltongue refracted back at him in a hundred broken echoes.

“You wanted it for its ability to reach between the planes of existence,” he says, “Not because it was a Hallow?”

“If a stone can tear something out of the Veil, then surely whatever power it uses to reach between the worlds could be mimicked. Reflected and reversed.”

“Except it didn’t work.”

“ *Careful* , Little Slytherin.”

“Just saying.”

“I didn’t consider the implications that it was a Hallow. A necromantic artefact… the ritual was unbalanced. The effects of the ring were inversed. Instead of summoning souls, it dispelled. Instead of life, it brought death,” the words ring with the tone of someone who has thought this over for years. Mulled over every mistake, every turn where they went wrong.

Tom works it out before he says it, “You said the Ethereal Plane was only a step away from the Veil anyway.”

A soft huff, “A twist and a half, maybe more, maybe less. I’m lucky I wasn’t thrown into the Veil.” Harry eyes up the ring on Tom’s palm but makes no move to reach for it as Tom slides it back onto his finger. Instead he leans back against the window frame, putting distance between them. His hands splay on the cold stone. “Your mother got in the way,” he says, almost bluntly.

Tom thinks he should be feeling something about this. Instead he feels nothing. He is a cave, emptied and pitted of its contents. “To stop you? Or help you?”

“I’m not sure. She… her magic was weak. Unstable. Her magic flared, the ring half turned, the ritual half woven, my spell half completed. And it backfired. Instead of summoning it dispelled. Instead of living, it brought death. I clung on. I tried so hard to cling on. But in the end your mother fell and I was left standing there. Present and yet not. Alive and yet not. *Screaming* and yet unheard.”

Tom imagines the scene. His mother getting in the way of Harry on a mission - she didn't stand a chance. Heavily pregnant, falling down, still with glazed eyes and heart stopping. Harry, trapped, standing there and discovering his ethereality. The bleached brown grass and leaves and plants surrounding the small Yorkshire hovel. Dumbledore appearing in a whirl of bright robes. Pausing by Morfin - mad, unwell but alive. The remnants of a spell - a yew wand, an invisible cloak, a cracked ring - and his mother, dead, her child, not.

And Harry there, *present* and *not* . Watching Dumbledore stalk forwards, summon the healers and then walk right through him. Harry had always seemed like an adult to Tom, young and eleven. But now at sixteen - twenty-three is still young. Barely an adult. Idealistic and foolhardy and suddenly alone.

Tom does not, never has, and never really will understand the idea of comfort. This is not that: this is possession. He straightens, standing from his perch. A step closer brings him into Harry's personal space. The other looks for a moment like the wide-eyed third-year he pretends to be, but the eyes look older, the green vivid.

It's the same colour as the killing curse,Tom thinks.

"That's why I can see you," Tom's fingers trace Harry's hand. Not quite holding hands. Not a facsimile of comfort. It would be a bruising claim if only Harry had physicality. The Gaunt ring, his horcrux, his soul, presses against skin that isn't there, "I'm a Gaunt."

"Yes," Harry breathes, and he's so close with Tom leaning over him, heads inches from each other, his words a soft breath of silence, "You're *my* Gaunt. The one who survived. Born just as I ripped the planes of our world apart."

"And that's why you need me. I can tear them open again."

"I believe you can," Harry says, "Will you, Tom?"

A simple question.

An even simpler answer.

"Okay," he agrees, "I'll help you."

"Really," Harry says, twisting to face him, eyes sheening silver. Tom's hand feels cold as magic dances up his skin from a world away. His horcrux *whispers* and *croons* in the back of his mind. He wonders if

Harry knows. If Harry recognises what he's done. *What he's achieved* .

Harry can't destroy him now, he thinks.

"What changed your mind?" the Dark Lord draws his hand back from the horcrux, green eyes almost glowing.

"I want Dumbledore out of the way," Tom breathes, "And I don't even need to ask you. You'd never rest until you saw him hanged."

Harry pulls his hand away from the horcrux, moving it instead to cradle Tom's jaw, "You're a delight," he sounds pleasantly surprised, "I'd have hated you if you were in my class at school, you know what you want and you don't care who you screw over along the way."

"And now?" Tom asks, curious despite himself, "Do you still hate me?"

Harry's fingers, the ghostly echo of them, leaves his skin tingling, "I adore you," he breathes instead, "You vicious bloodthirsty thing. I hope you've settled your taste for blood, you're going to need to get your hands a little dirty if you want me back on this plane of existence enough to end Albus Dumbledore's whole career."

"I'll shatter reality for you," Tom vows, "It will irk Dumbledore *no end* ."

soul

Chapter Notes

> Huge thanks to Easterndreamer for the beta work and picking through my typos and run-on sentences!

The ethereal plane is a world of fog. Something lurks in the white. Harry does not always know where he is. The liminal space around him warps in mirrored reflections of a world he knows and a world he doesn't. He is caged by the fabric of reality pressing down on him, blanketing him like the final shroud of earth scattered over a coffin. Ghostly shadows loom around him; the hint of buildings and architecture impressions in the mist.

(It is not a living world. It is an echo. It is not the new world Harry intended and he suffers for his folly.)

Tom asked him once where he goes when he isn't around the younger boy. Harry does not tell him he's lost. He does not even try to explain the deep shadows and white haze that he sinks into. Pushing through and longing to meet resistance and finding nothing but endless ever stretching fog.

Out of the corner of his eye something flits in his periphery. When he turns there is nothing there.

He thinks he hears claws sometimes. The clink of nails on stone. He thinks he hears someone breathing over his shoulder.

Something *hunts* .

He reaches for a shape in the gloom and latches on. He feels magic crackling through his blood like molten lava and he pushes it up, pushes it out. Brushes aside the fog until he can see the stone, can *almost* feel the sun on his face. Hogwarts congeals around him like an ink spill. He stumbles into it.

There is still fog at the edge of his vision. A flash of a dark predator that's always sightless and out of view. He ignores it. Sinks his magic in like a lodestone to anchor him and walks along familiar corridors, all too aware that it could all slip away.

He isn't always strong enough to stay present. He fears one day

slipping away entirely.

He paces, seeking Tom. He pauses for a moment on the edge of the stairs, watching as students crawl up and down the backbone of Hogwarts. He uses the magic he has sunk into the stones and pressed into the fabric stretched between the ethereal and the material. Tendrils like roots of a great tree reach out, tangling out the familiar tang of magic. Dark chocolate bitter and dappled sunlight - he finds Tom in the bowels of the castle in the Slytherin Common Room. Emerald green flourishings and a mottled light that never entirely fades glitter around the walls.

Tom sits in his chosen couch like a king on his throne. The boy's magic pulses under his skin like a chorus of broken bells. It calls Harry back to reality, to walking through a world of sepia tones, a fathom of leagues away from his touch. He walks stone floors and slips through to where Tom has made his haunt, surrounded by scattered books and his slowly expanding circle of influence.

A flicker of brown eyes note Harry's arrival but he says nothing. Not when Tom's surrounded by his yearmates.

There's a discordant note in the chime of his magic, Harry thinks. He had noticed it ever since the summer, more attuned to magic when it's the only thing giving him gravity some days. There's a rim of red around the iris. Tom's eyes have held this new colour ever since the summer.

What have you been up to, Tom Riddle?

There are two wands in Tom's possession. Both Harry's. Both Tom's. Phoenix feather threaded through both like a woven tapestry thread. The holly is pale in comparison to the warm caramel of the yew Harry had grown up with. The death tree that had once longed for power now favours the boy who had grown up in the cold. Harry misses it sometimes, like he misses a limb.

Long fingers twist the yew. Tom's watching him, siphoning spilled ink off his homework while those he has gathered to him mill around him. Carrow, Avery, Rosier, Nott… even one of the Blacks have joined Tom. Formed, his friends, his *followers* .

"I regret taking NEWT level transfiguration," Nott is saying, staring at his class notes like they're a foreign language, "Human transfiguration theory *doesn't make sense.* What does *matter* have to do with it?"

“Matter cannot be created or destroyed,” Rosier answers, “Conservation of mass - it’s Lavoisier’s principle - it’s in the first chapter of the textbook. First principle - preservation of life is required. You cannot create life and you cannot destroy it. Second principle - conservation of energy - energy can change forms but cannot be created or destroyed. Third principle - mass cannot be created or destroyed. So when you’re transfiguring between objects of a different size if something no longer exists in the physical part of it will exist in the metaphysical. This mass must still be taken into account when balancing—”

“How *in Merlin’s name* do you have that *memorised?”* Nott stares at Rosier.

The boy looks a bit flustered, “I like transfiguration, okay? And it makes sense. It’s why we start with matchsticks to needles - the spell is easy, minimal mass conversion. And why objects of different size aren’t really done until fifth year - the transference of energy makes spells more complicated because you have to conserve mass - but spells don’t last as long because pushing the physical to the metaphysical takes more energy—” he trails off, clearly seeing he’s lost Nott.

He’s lost Harry too, despite his age and having somehow managed an EE in his NEWTs. This is the sort of magical theory Hermione had loved. He wonders if these pureblood scions even know they’re quoting muggle science.

Tom must follow it, because he looks over his book, “Doesn’t that also apply to human transfiguration?” he asks in the tone of someone who already knows the answer, “It’s why transfiguration includes vanishing - it has to force things into the unreal. But living things are more than just mass…”

Rosier nods, wary. Ever since Tom broke his arm he’s always a little cautious around him - treats Tom like a snake that has bitten him once and he’s half-expecting it will bite again. Good, Tom thinks, he should be afraid. “Human transfiguration doesn’t just have to account for mass. It also has to account for the biological complexity… mess up and human thoughts and memories won’t transplant into the new form - it’s why animagus transformations are so dangerous.”

“What *does* happen when a human turns into a pea-sized bug?” Flora wrinkles her nose, “The mass just exists in the non-existent?”

“Forget what happens to their weight. *What happens to their soul?”* Lucretia says from where she’s playing chess with Avery. “Their memories… their spirit… especially if it’s not an animal - do you still have consciousness if someone turns you into an inanimate object?”

Now it’s Rosier’s turn to sniff imperiously, “You can’t *destroy* a soul. You can’t create or destroy energy. You can’t *make* life—”

“Thankfully,” Harry remarks to Tom, perching on the arm of the chair Tom lounges in. The boy shifts to avoid touching him, even though Harry himself has no physicality, “The in-between in which the principles of transfigurations fold space around exists within your realm and not mine.” It would have been an awful sixteen years having to dodge vanished objects.

“So you’re saying a soul is energy,” Lucretia says, “And it’s possible to transform this? To rearrange it to something else?”

“Transfiguration only changes the physical,” Rosier corrects.

“But you can destroy it,” Tom remarks, gaze flicking away from Harry, “Isn’t that the principle of the killing curse? It destroys the soul.”

“Is it destroyed, though, or merely transformed?” Flora is frowning, “But if you can’t destroy energy - is the soul energy? I always thought it was our minds and memories.”

Avery perks up from where he and Lucretia are still mid-chess game. “But is a memory-less man soulless? If I obliviate you, am I erasing your soul?”

“Obviously not,” Lucretia snipes, moving a knight across the board, “Check.”

Tom appears to be contemplating the conversation. He’s been lingering on the same page of his book for the past few minutes, page half-turned. The fingers curl over the page, a glint of black on his finger. It chimes in Harry’s periphery, like a pealing bell through the mist. Disconnected and out of tune but still somehow so *present* . The realest thing to him right now - Harry wonders if he reaches for the ring if he’ll make contact.

“A soul is our life force,” Flora says, “Duh.”

“Then why,” Avery sneers, “Why does the victim of a dementor attack keep breathing?”

“Our magic?” Nott offers.

“That implies anything with enough magic has a soul, but no matter how much magic we shove into paintings they’re not *alive* . We have not created life,” Rosier shakes his head.

“What *do* dementors eat?” Harry says, for Tom’s ears only, “If not the essence of our being.”

“The immortal,” Tom turns to look at him, as if he’s ignorant to the stares of his fellow Slytherins, “The soul is that which persists, eternal.”

He’s thumbing his ring. ‘ *Is it possible to tether?’* he had asked Harry once. Tether is just a prettier word for something darker, something more forbidden. There’s a gleam of red in his eyes and his magic echoes discordance.

“What did you *do* , Tom?” Harry asks, twisting to look at him. Slytherin’s heir does not answer, gaze flicking to his housemates. Flora and Avery keep bouncing back ideas.

“Our memories do not a soul make, our conscious state defines a soul —”

“I’m not arguing afterlife theory with you, I know your family subscribe to the belief that we will all be reborn—”

“If energy is never lost, then the soul is never lost and magic too will all just reform—”

“There are documented reviews of wizards and witches who encounter something beyond death, there are no reports of anyone remembering a *previous life* —”

“Just because your *father* doesn’t believe it to be true, Avery—”

Harry looks at Tom. “Do you believe in an afterlife, Little Slytherin?”

The nickname doesn’t fit anymore. Tom’s no longer the wide-eyed eleven-year old. He is sixteen, with sharp eyes and ambition bared like knife-sharp teeth to the world. “Or are you too afraid to find out?” Harry’s gaze flickers to the ring.

As if in reaction Tom’s hand goes to it, to cover it to *protect* it. “I refuse to fall and fail the way you did,” he says, quiet enough his

bickering yearmates do not notice. “I will not die. Death is beneath me.”

He has *mutilated* himself, Harry thinks. “A *horcrux* ,” he says, green eyes meeting brown, “A soul cannot be made or destroyed,” he quotes, “But it is mutable.”

“It is eternal,” Tom says, “In all forms.”

“It is blasphemous,” Harry says. His tone carries no judgement. Just grief, mourning what Tom has done to himself without even realising. Harry looks at the boy and it’s like he has dug out the dirt from the other’s grave and seen the corpse beneath, exposed to the elements.

Tom looks back, uncowed. “I refuse to be ripped from this world - trapped in the ethereal plane. I’m better than that.”

Oh , the Little Slytherin has *bite* , Harry thinks with fond amusement.

“Death is beneath me,” Tom repeats

Harry does not waste time with warnings and scoldings. He himself has hands blackened and frostbitten from reaching too far beyond the veil. His footsteps leave trails of the blood and destruction in his wake.

Harry trusts Tom. He has known Tom for six years and watched him grow into his magic and power. “Careful,” is all he says, “If you rip it too many times it will fray.”

The other Slytherins’ conversation has progressed to the intricacies between transfiguration and transportation. Flora looks stressed, fiddling with a lock of loose hair. “If it’s not physical - are you transporting it somewhere? Does the magic not hold similarities to portkeys? To displace its location—”

“A portkey is still real; the mass from a transfigured object is not real in that moment—”

“But the displacement of the mass should have the same principles. And thus conjuration, and the summoning of a portkey requires the same ties to reverse the transfiguration, no?”

“With the right tether,” Tom wonders aloud, “Can you not retrieve and conjure anything? Arithmetic equations do equate to objects, no?”

“Only if they *exist* ,” Flora argues, “You can’t *create* , but if something’s *displaced*— ”

“Do more tethers help?” Tom poses, addressing Flora but looking at Harry, “Seven holds the most power. So maybe using seven in a runic combination would allow the conjuration of an object with more mass? Potentially even a human: soul and all?”

“Portkeys *displace* ,” Rosier is considering this too, “To reverse that— *potentially* , but you’d *have* to have a tether—”

“If you had the right sort of tether,” Tom answers, “Could you theoretically summon a construct?” It's an awful half-answer that he addresses Rosier but speaks to Harry. So many layers to his words, so many interpretations. “Seven would hold more power, but other ways of increasing the strength exist - blood, magic… bone…”

Harry’s tone is a warning. “ *Tom* —”

“I’m done,” Lucretia shakes her head, “For the last time, Avery, *checkmate* . Stop *cheating* .”

“I’m lost,” Nott says, “Too many definitions for my liking. This is making my head hurt.”

“A seventh of you,” Harry says to Tom, “Is still *less* than the whole of you. It would be a shame if the world were to lose your mind, Tom Riddle.”

“A tether is still a tether,” Tom shrugs, “For me. And…” he twists, black stone catching the firelight in the common room, “And for you.”

*

The fire grows dim. The logs are not restocked and the shadows grow long. Gradually the crowds drift off until only Tom remains, languishing in his cushioned throne of a settee. He pages slowly and languidly through his books, Harry slipping from his perch on the armchair to pace to the fire at one point, like he can still feel the warmth even a world away.

Tom is careful with his words. Harry’s temper is as mercurial as the silver sheen to his eyes. His emotions are a storm and Tom never quite knows which way the wind will blow. Today the waters are calm. That is almost more dangerous. He twists to face Harry where the other paces like a restless cat around the fire.

“Are you a soul?” Tom asks, when he’s the only one in the common room. It’s something he’s been curious about all night. “Or something less? Less than a body. Less than a spirit.” Tom’s own personal phantom.

Knowing Harry is the Reaper changes little. A Dark Lord, Tom thinks, and yet he is still the infuriating wraith who has haunted Tom’s Hogwarts years. A ghostly phantom with a side of murder. Harry turns back to him, face unilluminated by the fire of a different world, “More of a soul than you are now,” he says, but there is no scolding to his words, “I’m as real as you, Tom. They never found a body, you know?”

“All they found was me, your wand and the ring,” Tom says, “And probably your cloak. Surely one of those can function as a tether. It’s not functionally a horcrux, but the theory is the same—”

Harry’s head tilts and he steps away from the fire, towards Tom. “Do you even know the consequences of a horcrux?” he asks, “Egyptians believed the soul was made of many pieces. One mage tried to split it into these parts. ‘ *I spent eight months without eating and drinking like a man’,* ” he wrote in a letter, *‘what wicked thing have I done’* . He lost his mind from it. One does the job, Tom, don’t risk everything for something as petty as theoretical curiosity.”

Tom straightens on the couch from his lazy slouch, “So seven won’t work. Fine. One does the job,” he mocks.

Harry’s gaze is broken mirrors reflecting back cracks, seeing him in that moment in all his shattered pieces. “It’s your *soul* ,” he says, “Whatever souls are made of — did you even consider what impact it might have?”

“Forgive me father for I have sinned,” Tom grins. “‘Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Cast me into a lake of fire, bar me from Heaven’s gates - why should I care? I have erased death as a variable.”

“Everything dies,” Harry paces back towards Tom’s chair. Tom tosses his book aside, giving up the pretence of reading with nobody around to fake it for, “Even you.”

“Then I will die in parts, if they ever realise,” Tom shrugs one shoulder, casually. “What happens to souls, when we die?” he looks up at Harry, resting his head back on the couch chair, exposing the long line of a pale throat. His pulse is visible beneath the thin web of skin.

“Nobody knows the answer, Tom. Not even me.”

Tom smiles, a wicked, bright-eyed thing, “But I thought you were *like* death. Or are you just a reaper? A *servant* ?”

Static of a touch along his throat as Harry stands between his spread legs. “Aren’t we all servants?” Harry’s grin is shattered porcelain, “We all die eventually.”

"I won't." It is not a falsehood. It is a statement of fact, an immovable object, "I'll live forever."

"Will you?" Harry appears amused more than anything.

"Yes. And you will too."

“Will I?”

“You’re a Dark Lord,” Tom says, shifting forwards. Harry reaches for him, one arm planted by Tom’s head and the other moving as if to straighten his collar, “You’re *the* Dark Lord. Even though you don’t act like one.”

That’s not true - Harry has never tried to hide his tendency for murder and rituals that catapulted him into the ethereal plane.

“It wasn’t my plan when I graduated. The world made me one. I just wanted to make things better.”

“But they flocked to you. Your… *followers* ?”

“My Association. An inside-joke. I ran a club during school. Those closest knew who I was. Those on the edges only ever saw the mask.”

“The Reaper.”

“A Dark Lord is not a thing of magic. It’s just a name. Almost an insult. It is not a title up for grabs. It is not a position of magic or status. It is not,” Harry says, voice startlingly clear for a moment, “It is not a title you can just take from me, Little Slytherin.”

“I don’t need your title,” Tom sneers.

He will have a title of his own. *Voldemort* .

“No, I doubt you would,” Harry leans over him. He’s so close, Tom can almost feel the warmth of a body that isn’t there, “You don’t like

the idea of death, do you. You flee from it, while *I* walk with it."

Tom reaches, put off by the lack of physicality on the other side. His fingers brush what should be Harry's collarbone. Harry's form doesn't quite blur into his but maybe if he pressed forward just a bit more, breathed in deeper, then the essence of the other would flow into him, their hearts would sync and they'd be as close as two people physically could be. "They call you the Reaper." Tom says, "He Who Walks With Death. You said you practised necromancy - have you walked through the Veil? Can you bring the dead back to life?

Harry scoffs, the air around him cold as he leeches energy from it. "I do not play with what is beyond death, but some things can be coaxed into living a little longer. I have some skill with healing and stories are easily exaggerated. Dumbledore hit me with a cutting curse across the throat once," he arches his neck to show off the remnants of a grisly wound, "I healed it. Made the blood flow backwards in my veins and air still in my lungs. I was told it looked impressive. Dumbledore looked mildly nauseated by it."

"Using necromancy to heal?" it sparks Tom's curiosity. He wants to trace his fingers along Harry's scar, to feel the flesh warm beneath his skin and to feel the flutter of a pulse. He can't. He curls his fingers into a fist, pulling back slightly.

"I used enough of it that the name stuck. I was planning to bring them to a new world - I think they thought it appropriate."

"A new world," Tom realises, and for the first time he fully understands this, "A new plane of existence. Here, but not here. Accessible but separated. Folded into where it once was but with no risk of muggles ever finding it."

It's insane. It's genius. It could work, Tom thinks, but the magical theory alone is immense. The logistical considerations are staggering.

"The ultimate goal was to displace our world," Harry says. "Peel a copy off from the original. Bring our homes and families and creatures to a mimicry of where we live now, since asking people to abandon their heritage was too much. The only difference would be the lack of muggles. The theory was only half realised, but I'm sure Hermione continued our research. We lacked the power source, see, and a tether to a different plane to start with. But now we have it."

There is no pretence between them. Tom *sees* Harry. And Harry sees him.

The Dark Lord is ageless at twenty-three with a silver sheen to his eyes, a knife's edge to his jaw and blackened tips to his fingers. A hundred scars scatter his skin like he'd been caught in a hailstorm of glass, all healed into hundreds of pale white-red lines criss-crossing his skin. His eyes gleam with a still unrealised vision.

And in return Tom's eyes are dipped in poppy petals, his skin paler than before and his grin is the quill scratch of a hundred murder confessions. "I won't bow to you," he says, and like this, Harry leaning over him, they could share breath were they in the same world. "Will you make me?"

For a moment Tom fears he has provoked the frostbitten fury of the man, but Harry just looks inordinately thrilled with the statement. He draws back, looking at Tom like a man finding a gold vein, cutting it open, watching it bleed blood and money. "You won't? Do you intend to *replace me* ?" he laughs, "Our fates are entwined; they're attached," Harry murmurs,half to himself, "Do you think there are worlds where we are not tangled together so intricately, Tom Riddle?"

Tom does not bow to the power Harry is exuding. In that moment, he is cut from marble, unmovable, "Are we to fight?" He asks. Ready to cut, to scar, if needed, "You had your time. I will rise with or without you. Will you stand in my way?"

"I won't be threatened by Dumbledore's dog. Are you his or mine?" Harry's fingers around Tom's throat should bruise. A part of Tom wants them to, wants the other to be able to leave bruises like an ink-stained message on his skin.

"I do not bow," Tom hisses again, "Will you make me?"

("Bow to me," Voldemort says in a different world, "Join me," he offers once. Harry's temper is mercurial but he's never had to *force* people to bow to him.)

(They do it willingly in any world.)

"No," Harry says, "I will not have you bow. I would think less of you for it. I will take you as you are - murder and magic and bad decisions. I will have all of you, Tom Riddle, and in return you will have all of me. As you always have."

(People follow Harry willingly, in any world.)

"You have me," Tom vows.

haunt

The first time was easy. The guilt only hit after.

The second time was harder.

Then it was all just repetition.

People die so *easily* . A fine system working in harmony — crush it, break it — and it unravels. A frail bag of flesh and bones and cells and processes.

Harry used to see a line between good and evil — but with time he realises how blurred the line is.

Harry is not a murderer. He and those who follow him do not delight in causing pain and in destroying lives. They do what they do to help people. Nobody understands that, that's all.

The first is Draco Malfoy, bleeding out in the bathroom.

Self-defence.

The second, and third, and fourth, and others in the Ministry, when he reached out and pressed his fingers against a stone archway and sent cracks running through the entire structure — that’s just collateral damage.

Then it is just some auror, looming behind Ron with a lethal spell on the tip of his wand. Harry doesn't go for the disarm or the stun. He'd trained in defence and studied spell speeds. He knows that nothing travels fast enough to block or deter the oncoming attack. Nothing, that is, except the killing curse. Near instantaneous, they say.

Only a few seconds, Harry says on reflection, but faster than a stunning spell.

There are no excuses for this one.

*

“I thought you were dead,” Ginny says, in the shadow of an alcove in Grimmauld Place, pressed so close Harry can feel her warmth. But her expression is shuttered; she looks at him like she is grieving.

Someday, it will occur to Harry that she looks at him the same way Tom does: wanting to *touch* but knowing his fingers will pass straight through.

“Aren’t you?” she whispers. “They said you were *dead* . They said you *dived into a sea of dementors* . Are you saying Death did not Reap you, that day?” The silence is like snow: a thick weight that sits on a crisp untouched world. And maybe —just maybe —if they never breach it, it will go undisturbed just a moment longer.

Then Ginny pushes through it, brash and fiery to the end. “They’ll *hang* you,” she says, “They’ll kill you for this. Call you a monster. A Dark Lord. An *abomination* . For reaching into the cracks and tearing them wide open and making them *see* .”

(There have been others throughout the years. Women with snakes for hair. Men with red eyes and scales and fangs and horns. Circe on her island with vines woven through flesh. Grindelwald with his mismatched eyes, uncontrollable visions and skin and hair bleached of all colour.

Harry does not look like a Dark Lord. Except—

There's a sheen of mercury to his gaze. His fingertips are blackened with frostbite. There are moments when he realises he hasn’t been breathing.)

Somewhere out there, Hermione has the figures. Every year, over half of Hogwarts’ muggleborn graduates return to the muggle world, discouraged by a lack of job prospects and discrimination at every turn. Among the purebloods, the birth statistics are half of what they were even fifty years ago. Hogwarts intake number is a fraction of what it used to be.

Magic is dying.

The Ministry lets criminals walk. It lets magical traditions be forgotten, hoarded away and ostracised. It lets children walk through corridors lined with monsters and calls it *safety* .

“They can call me what they want,” Harry says, uncaringly, “If we continue to do nothing we’ll go *extinct* . If they need someone to hang, let it be me. At least they’ll be alive to hang me for it. Besides,” he arches his neck, exuding a false confidence he does not feel at this moment, “I’m not a terrorist. I am not a dictator like Grindelwald. The magic I’m using is only illegal because people find the idea of

menstrual blood and rabbit hearts off-putting."

"It *is* a little disgusting," Ginny says, brushing a lock of her red hair behind her ears, "Did you get that spell from your latest raid on a pureblood manor?"

"Maybe."

Harry's grin is a wild, savage thing of open moorland and the ice bite of wind. She meets his gaze and then her eyes flick away.

"Ron says somebody died."

"Yes," he says. He does not give excuses. He doesn't have any to give. "Mors vincit omnia," he quotes to her, "Death always wins. It will come for us all eventually."

Ginny takes a step back. He thinks she is going to flee but she just looks at him, her brown eyes searching for some part of himself that he doesn't even recognise anymore. He thinks of golden summers playing Quidditch where he wanted nothing more than to run fingers through Ginny's hair and tell jokes over sweets with his friends.

Now he dreams of refracted worlds. Of voices beyond the edge of hearing and a purpose to bring their disjointed world together. His friends are separated from him by bowed heads and a refrain of *my lord* and the siren call of that greater purpose.

"I thought I knew who you were," Ginny says, slowly.

Harry has never known the sense of missing someone who stands right in front of him, until he has made himself into something untouchable, carved himself into their leader. Their *Lord.* Ginny is right —a part of him has died. What now walks in his skin is something new.

"You were the one who protected others. The boy who would put himself in front of those unable to defend themselves. The boy who would die for those he loved. I don't think I understand what that meant. Not really."

And maybe that was why they hadn't worked out.

She has always seen him in a way that Ron and Hermione didn't. She'd seen the lies he cloaked himself with and the boy underneath.

“But I see you now. My Lord.”

*

Despite what Harry must think, Albus does not know the identity of the man they call the Reaper. Not at first, at least.

The Reaper is a shadow at midday. A footprint in the snow in the middle of a blizzard. The marrow of your bone when it has lain in the sun to dry. The Reaper is a concept. An idea. The hint of a form that doesn’t exist. *Cannot* exist.

He appears in the wake of the shattering of the Ministry’s wards. The damage spreads down to the very foundations and yet is still merely a physical symptom of a deeper illness that slowly makes itself known.

The Reaper is a manifestation of the rot that had been seeping between the cracks of the magical world. He is the whisper in the Wizengamot, a voice behind those who step up and talk about how lax the Ministry has grown — *how could they let a disaster like this happen* . He is the disappearance of Grindelwald’s followers who walked: the bigoted purebloods, the cowardly muggleborns. He is the spark of change.

If the protective spells keeping the Ministry hidden had collapsed, paper thin — what was next?

Their hospital? Their *school* ? Their economy?

Dumbledore had cautioned Kingsley against stripping the ward stones down. He had foreseen the weakness they were exposing to the open air and anticipated the unrest that was already brewing. The Ministry didn’t heed his advice.

When Albus apparates in, summoned by Kingsley’s lynx, Diagon Alley is already in chaos. Ministry crews who had been half-way through rebuilding the protective spells mingle with panicked citizens and protesters against the whole endeavour — why lower your shield to check for dents? Why not just layer it up stronger, why not reforge it while still cowering behind it?

And why not be rid of the need to hide behind masks and spells entirely?

In the middle of the alley, cloaked figures step out into the world to make their statement known. Some are masked - others aren’t. Albus

spots faces he has watched pass through his classroom amongst them.

He sees the Reaper. The first time he sets eyes on the man he is merely another cloaked figure in the chaos, crouching over two children, innocents caught in the crossfire. They can't have been older than six or seven. They lie there, dust-stained and still.

Albus is distracted. When he turns back to the hooded man, he has his wand pressed to the sternum of the little girl. Her pigtail has come loose, spilling blonde curls onto the pavement. As Albus watches, she stirs. He feels the blood in his veins chill.

A second later the boy scrambles up. He's crying with dry, heaving sobs. Their mother screams their names with horror and desperation as they run to her.

(Harry's learned how to heal since he knelt on the floor of a bathroom with a dying boy beneath his fingers. He's learned how to knit bones back together, to stitch lacerations closed and restart a heart. It is necromancy in name only.

But all the bystanders can see is children bathed in blood and bone shards standing and breathing. And the crowds *whisper* .

All stories are born somewhere. The wizarding world has always been prone to exaggeration.)

The cloaked figure half-turns, as if sensing Albus watching him. His mask is silver and covers the nose up, leaving just a jawline and neck visible, solid metal when the eyes should be, giving the appearance the man is sightless. The only visible skin is rough, stubbled and flecked with a silvery web of scars. "Albus Dumbledore," he says, a spell modulating his voice to several tones layered into the unrecognisable.

Reaper , Albus thinks. People like to whisper, *the Reaper promises a new world.* Albus will not do this nameless, *faceless* spectre the honour of addressing him by that title. There is only a man behind the mask. "Practising necromancy is a dangerous road," Albus says, feeling an invisible weight settle on his shoulders as he eyes up the young man in front of him and he sees only Gellert.

"And you'd know all about that," the Reaper tilts his head, "Always so full of wise words with nothing to follow it up."

There's a flash as his wand dances, flicking a spell out to prevent a

nearby roof from cascading down sideways onto one of his followers - a young woman - also masked. Hers is white with dark holes for the eyes.

“Thanks, my Lord,” she says, ducking her head.

Albus tastes bile.

“They’re fixing the wards,” the Reaper says to her, appearing unruffled by this fact. “Go. Get out of here.”

Albus throws a stunning spell towards her, but it’s absorbed by a shimmering shield. The woman apparates away, unharmed. “Oh no,” the Reaper scolds, “You don’t get to interfere *now* after all these years of passivity.”

“If these wards shatter, it will destroy the centre of muggle London,” Albus says. “You can’t do that.”

“Actually, we can,” the man’s sightless gaze looks at him, the pair sizing each other up for a moment. “It’s Ministry approved, haven’t you heard? They’re worried about the strength of the wards after those in the Ministry broke. These ones need *tearing down* to fix them.”

“You’re condemning people to death.”

“Muggles,” the man shrugs. “And no, not if they followed the warnings that went out about some local building demolition requiring their evacuation. No deaths. Not unnecessarily. We’re just following the government mandate.”

“You’re inciting fear and chaos,” Albus says.

“One could say we intervened to *save people* from the protesters. Things turn violent so quickly when people are scared.”

“The aurors had it under control.”

“Oh? Like they had their own wards *under control?”*

Albus sends a disarming spell forwards. It’s countered with another shield that lingers just long enough to absorb the spell, and then the man starts casting his own curses.

“How quickly you jump to their protection,” the Reaper mocks, “How quickly you come to fight me. I’m flattered. It took you *years* to leave your castle to face Grindelwald."

He's constant movement, a blur dancing between crumbling stones, spells slashing out only for Albus to brush them aside.

The sharp *crack* of apparition and Albus barely turns in time to catch the force of an explosion hex from behind him. The man laughs, twirling his wand; a black orb forms on the end and he throws it at Albus. The orb grows, sucking in its surroundings like a gravity well, growing in weight. A duelling pair nearby are dragged closer, an Order member falling over themselves while the Association member twists out of the way, cleverly anchored to the floor with a sticking charm, clearly used to this spell.

Albus doesn't recognise this gravity magic. He elects to do the safest thing which is to deflect it sideways into a building. It crushes stone and wooden beams like paper, sucking everything inwards before the Reaper cancels the spell, instead sending twirling jets of fire and ice at him.

The man is young. He has power but lacks experience. He has potential, unrealised. His duelling style has its distinct quirks but Albus does not recognise them.

(Had Albus paid more attention to the children passing through his halls perhaps he would have. Had Albus paid attention to the bright eyes in a sea of faces perhaps the realisation of who stands there behind the sightless mask would not be a surprise.)

There is the sharp pop of more Ministry wizards apparating in. A streak of silver and a mare appears, made of mist and happy memories. Dumbledore does not catch the message as the horse shakes her head, mane fluttering, but the Reaper's spells grow defensive. A wall of ice and stone gives him a temporary reprieve to twist his wand sideways and form his own patronus, his own message spinning up and away.

Albus watches it. The Reaper's patronus is a moth. The shadow of death stirring from the corpse of what had once been.

And Albus remembers a certain boy in his office in sixth year. Hands shaking, a resolute clench to his jaw, a certainty that he was going to be expelled. He had faced Albus with the look of someone walking to the hangman's noose.

Even then, there had been rage. Muted. Twisted. Left out in the cold too long and frosting over into something new. Something dangerous.

It's that, more than anything, that Albus recognizes in the Reaper. The frozen brutal anger. The passion with all the fire burned cold. He produces a patronus without a second thought, a sliver of silver like a dagger spinning away from him. Fluttering wings and an eye patterned into silver, the moth spins around.

The patronus is not a stag, but the caster is the same.

"Harry," he says.

The Reaper laughs, "Am I?"

He's dead, Ron Weasley had said, *when the Ministry fell, he went to hold off the dementors.*

Harry Potter would never fall to dementors, Albus thinks, watching the shadow of the boy with his new patronus.

He had watched Harry through the years. James and Lily's boy was a quiet, beaten down thing with a vicious streak of righteousness, who still tried to be so *kind* . Over Hogwarts his temper became mercurial, his edge for violence became more pronounced, his drive became a tendency to obsession.

His patronus had been a stag: a willful, proud creature with the weight of the world on its tined head.

It is not a stag anymore. It has decayed to something smaller. Sharp and fierce and drawn to a purpose he cannot hope to understand.

"Don't do this," Dumbledore says, "Our world does not deserve to be ripped into pieces."

"It does," Harry tells him easily, calm and purpose-driven, "So we can rebuild. We deserve *so much more* ."

"Do you feel you deserve more? Did I fail you that much?"

The masked, blinded face tilts, but now Albus can hear the familiarity that laces his tone. "You'd watch those children under your care crawl through trenches in your war," Harry accuses, "You'd hide away in your castle and pretend you're fettered and castrated."

"Your parents wouldn't want this."

Harry laughs. It's a bitter and burned sound, like coffee grounds left to char on the stove too long until past saving. His jaw catches the light,

those silver lacerations from the dementors clearly visible. Harry threw himself into hell to save them. Somehow he dragged himself back out still breathing. "My parents—" he answers in response, "—*died* because of your inaction," the accusation is sharp, a dagger driven into his chest. The Reaper's magic twists to form ice shards ready to cut and slice. "You would see me collared and chained too, if you had your way. Bowing and grovelling for scraps. Better to die free than enslaved to a system that doesn't want us."

Heat glows from the shield Albus raises against the Reaper's ice. It starts to melt only for water to morph into a twirling slick serpent the size of a small basilisk. It lunges.

Albus throws a cutting curse at it. The Elder Wand is rough beneath his fingers as magic flows almost too easily from it. The cobra rears back, hood flaring and the spell missing. It passes through the air where the snake had been only seconds before.

It misses the cobra.

But Harry's standing right behind it.

He spins in a dodge but it still catches him across the throat. Albus sees him go down before he's distracted by the water crashing over him in a wave. He dispells it, unravelling the spell into mist.

For a moment the air is hazy with water droplets. He blinks the mist from his lashes, feeling the water press against his skin. He can see the dark shape of the Reaper - of Harry - doubled over. The Elder Wand twirls through the air, mist parting as Albus steps forwards, steeling himself for what he will have to do.

He wonders if this is it.

If the Reaper will fall as quickly as he rose. He wonders if he's just ripped his soul in two, the way he'd always feared.

Harry's on his knees. Someone from his side screams as the mist parts, revealing Dumbledore standing and Harry on the ground. The Reaper's form sways. His mask is dislodged and Dumbledore can see his face fully in this moment — shadowed and still hooded — but he can see those green eyes begin to glaze.

Regret is a scorpion, coiling in his stomach, sinking its poison into his system. The Elder Wand slips slightly in his grip but he maintains his grasp as he steps forwards. He's not sure for what reason — to finish

it, to try and help, to merely observe the dying man whose carotid he just sliced in two.

But Harry's form does not slump. Instead he lurches, some fearsome force pulling him to his feet, hand flying up.

The air condenses. It's moggy in the aftermath of the water, still lingering: storm thick. It feels like the pressure in the summer when a storm is overdue. Albus feels his ears pop. He clenches his jaw, his gaze fixed on where Harry's hand hovers above his ruined throat. His throat is an open grave, and instead of letting the dirt seep through his fingers everything—

— stills —

Albus feels own heart thudding. Air whistles dry down the back of his throat. Blood congeals in the air in front of him. Blood droplets grow heavy, becoming almost solid.

And then they begin to move.

Like an ink spill in reverse the blood drops draw together. Like rain running backwards up a window, slivering together and back to the wound across Harry's neck. Harry is still. A pale, deathless thing. His fingertips are blackened. His lips are wrapped around a spell Albus cannot hear.

Red blood presses back into the wound, darkening almost to black. Veins run dark up Harry's neck. The wound is ageing: raw and weeks old and not one of twenty seconds ago. The boy's eyes flutter open — arsenic green against the red still staining his neck.

Their eyes meet for a split second. Albus realises what's happened moments too late. Harry is already moving. Stumbling back, fingers curling around his mask and sliding it back on. He whirls away, the remnants of his own arterial blood still misting in the air around him. Albus throws spells after him — none of them lethal, nothing bloody or murderous —

Harry bats them aside without even looking. A blink and he's gone, apparating into the ether.

*

The Reaper re-appears a week later. Still breathing and with a nasty scar across his throat stitched with unicorn hair and a prayer. The

whispers when he appears at the next raid are awed, terrified, because they had seen him stumble away, bleeding from his neck, proving he was only human and as prone to death as they are.

And then he returned, still breathing, stitched scar across his throat. Death came for him and left again. He is already death's own.

Death's Reaper, they whisper, *a necromancer, a dark lord.*

Dumbledore has already defeated one Dark Lord.

He does not know if he has the strength to look into the eyes of another boy and see that festering enmity that has grown there.

He does not know if he has the strength to blame Harry for his choice. Can he do it? Can he kill the child that he has seen grow into a beautiful monster before his eyes?

(He doesn't have to make that choice.)

Something rips Harry from the world at the same moment Merope Gaunt stops breathing. The child inside stops moving (but only for a moment).

Harry Potter and Tom Riddle die together.

And then Dumbledore is there with his own spells and healing. Harry is pressed between planes with fury and intent shared by the crying baby as Tom takes his first breath.

And they live.

*

(Now)

Harry Potter lingers in one of his favourite haunts - Dumbledore's office.

He knows Dumbledore is aware of who he is. He'd known almost instantly since meeting him — some uncanny, *unnerving* skill that irritates Harry even now. His mask had no eye holes, protecting him from legilimency, and yet Dumbledore had stared at him even from the start, *judged* him and found him wanting.

Harry paces by the bookshelves, reading the titles of books he has read a thousand times before. His fingers rub at the slightly knotted

scar over his neck.

That fight where Dumbledore had almost opened up Harry's throat had not been the last time they had stood across the battlefield from each other. Harry had made a point — after — of never duelling the other man for long. The headmaster had fifty years more experience than he did and he had the awful habit of calling Harry by his name as if he were still a wayward school boy.

A part of him snarls and gnashes silvered fangs. Anger is a festering wound that never quite heals right.

People are not born evil but the world carves it out of them.

Harry was not born with the taste of blood in his mouth.

But he tastes it now.

" —t here's been no sign," Alastor Moody is saying. The gruff auror is leaning heavily on his fake leg. Harry still remembers the time one of Seamus' explosions took it off. Moody's missing an eye too — one of Harry's own spells had done that.

The magical eye spins wildly around the office.

It doesn't even linger on the balcony that Harry's pacing along.

Kingsley looks wary, "Ron Weasley still slips his tracking spell but everytime we check he's back where he's meant to be. He knows we know he sneaks away. He knows we don't know where he goes. Apart from the occasional visit to Godric's Hollow, Granger is back causing purebloods headaches in the Ministry."

"If the Reaper is returning, none of the other Association members know anything," Moody says. He sounds almost disappointed. "Bones and Longbottom and Lovegood are clean. Got no dirt on them, not the slightest hint of trouble."

"Nothing from Azkaban," Kingsley adds, glancing to where Dumbledore is stroking his beard and peering over his pensieve. Memory strands like silky gossamer threads swirl in the basin, glittering off the half-moon spectacles. The headmaster looks troubled.

Harry leads over the balcony, hands clasped, watching the small meeting of Order members. Moody seems to share Dumbledore's apprehension, but Kingsley and McGonagall just look bemused.

“And Tom?”

On the balcony Harry stills, eyes narrowing. *Tom* . The familiarity in that address galls him.

Tom isn’t yours , he wants to say, *Tom is mine.* Together they’re the last heirs of Peverell. Tom’s already been dabbling in illegal, soul-rending magic beyond Dumbledore’s awareness or comprehension. The old man had always been so *scared* of pushing the boundaries. Of doing what he needed to, what he *could* —

Instead he hid in his office and turned a blind eye to the world. Turned a blind eye to his *students* .

“The boy is a diligent student,” Professor McGonagall says, stiffly, “Outstandings and Exceed Expectations in all his OWLs. A reliable prefect. Well-liked by his classmates.”

“Oh?” Moody whirls, “I heard he broke a boy’s arm. I hear the pureblood heirs are learning *dark arts* under him.”

“Their spells are all Ministry-approved,” the transfiguration professor sniffs, “Horace assures me he checks in regularly.”

“He’s a Gaunt,” Moody scoffs, “They brought in his uncle for murder this summer. Did you ask the boy what happened, Albus?”

Harry’s head tilts to one side. He knows Tom obtained the ring.

He wonders who died.

“No,” Albus says, “I didn’t want to distract him. If it was one of the Reaper’s men who hunted down Tom Riddle Senior…”

Oh , Harry thinks. *Oh, Tom. What did you do?*

“It was the uncle - he confessed to the aurors.”

“Yes,” Albus agrees, placidly, “He did.”

Dumbledore *knows* . With that same uncanny ability to figure Harry out, he suspects Tom had a hand in his father’s death. Tom is already under scrutiny. He was certainly being watched by the Order during the summer, but seemed to at least have gone to the effort of avoiding detection.

The boy’s too clever for his own good sometimes. Pretty. Like a rose

bush. But with too many thorns.

Harry steps around the balcony to peer down at Dumbledore below. The headmaster shivers slightly, as Harry's presence leaks the slightest hint of a cool breeze into the world. It's never more than that, if Harry doesn't dare try to press through the way he does when reaching for Tom, the way he did sinking claws into Umbridge.

Across the office Dumbledore's phoenix looks at him. As always, Fawkes just croons softly, the notes trickling through to even Harry's ears, a plane away. As always Harry feels that strange lurch in his stomach like he's falling.

The silver threads in the pensieve unravel in the basin. Harry catches a glimpse of his own face —young, Gryffindor robes —and then the Reaper, with an eyeless mask and dark hood, breathing out a breath that steamed silver in the air.

The image blurs as the door to Dumbledore's office creaks open and a man steps in. Harry slouches on his perch, green gaze tracking Severus Snape as he enters. Greasy hair, sallow face, large hooked nose — the man is just as unpleasant in appearance as he was when Harry was in school.

Albus perks up as Snape appears, "Ah, Severus, do join us. Take a seat. We were just discussing young Mr Riddle. How have you found him in class?"

Snape pauses by where Kingsley and McGonagall are sitting but opts to stand. Moody is squinting at him with both eyes and Dumbledore's eyes are twinkling. "His defence is… adequate. His knowledge of duelling is… *advanced* ."

Harry feels a flare of pride.

"The boy seems sufficiently capable of defending himself should the need arise. Although if the Reaper did reappear and decide to finish what he started then I hardly think one year of advanced lessons would save him."

"We're so sure the Reaper would kill him?" Kingsley questions. "You mentioned he was after a Gaunt heirloom."

Albus twirls his wand over the pensieve. Knobbled Elder, right there and still not Harry's. Not *yet* . "I think his goal would be unchanged. Morfin may be safe in Azkaban, but Tom is vulnerable. Vulnerable

and…idealistic. It may be that someone already went after Morfin… but the boy remains a symbol of the Reaper's defeat." A pause. The man is playing chess, Harry can see that, trying to predict moves that aren't there. "He's an unknown. He could be targeted. He could be a threat that someone wants to be rid of early."

They don't have a clue, Harry thinks, a fierce thrill racing through him. It's the same adrenaline he used to get from flying on a broom.

Down below Severus is looking uncomfortable, "And have you told the boy?" he asks, "Have you told Riddle about who the Reaper is, and what you expect him to do?"

"In time," Dumbledore says, sagely, finally turning from the pensieve, "He is a child. After the holidays he'll have reached his majority. He can join the Order if he wants. And maybe with his blood — if he consents— we can finally track down the Reaper."

It's in the blood , Harry has said, and now here it is, proven. Blood and power. The muggleborns would be disgusted, the Ministry had come to be embarrassed by it — but in the end magic would always be raw blood and power.

And maybe blood and power were what Harry and Tom needed right now.

"He won't fight for you," Snape — as much as Harry loathes the man — has made a more accurate assessment of Tom in a month than Dumbledore has in six years. "He's a Slytherin. He'll only help you if it'll benefit him."

Dumbledore looks up at Snape with the foolish naivety about innate goodness he has always held sparkling in his blue eyes. Harry wants to scoff.

Harry stopped believing in morality when he walked away from a dead boy in a bathroom with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. People have called him evil. But he knows that good intentions can have terrible consequences. Morality is subjective. A construct that neither Tom nor Harry adhere to anymore.

"We may still have Tom's help," Dumbledore prays.

You don't, Harry wants to sneer. Wants to be ugly and bold in this declaration. *You do not have him. You never did.*

I do.

Harry has all of Tom. He *wants* all of Tom. He will have the blood on Tom's hands and the darkness in his magic. He will have the snake's tongue in his veins and the jealousy of his flesh. He will have the memories of a muggle father dying to a killing curse under his tongue.

He knows this instinctively: *Tom is his* . Harry knows the day will come soon when he can look at Dumbledore and speak the words to his face.

I win.

So I win.

*

For almost as long as Hermione Granger-Weasley has been a witch, she had known Harry Potter.

They hadn't been friends at first. But friendships often work out that way, with false starts and awkward meetings and childhood fumblings. And Ron Weasley and Harry Potter had bound themselves to her over and over as something deeper than friends. Even when Ron and Hermione graduated from their bickering to snogging in a broom closet, it was still the three of them: Harry with his bright green eyes and plans, Ron with the strategy and heart and Hermione with the logic and books.

Harry has been gone for nearly seventeen years. One would think she would get used to the missing third of their friendship. For seventeen years they have been without their leader. A ship unanchored. Hermione busies herself in her work. Ron drifts around aimlessly.

It feels like they're treading water.

She remembers when she last saw him: wry grin, silver mask in hand as he went out alone to investigate the Gaunt line. Confidence, etched into his form, obsession and rituals and his mother's research and Hermione's theories and *he had been so close* to making an anchor to a different plane.

Ron had taken the twins and Lee Jordan to pose as a distraction. Hermione had played the good little Ministry worker and worked late into the evening, even on the last day of the year.

She hadn't heard about it until later. Until Lee had been arrested and Fred was dead and Ron had stumbled home nursing a curse that nearly took his arm off. Until their coins had burned *cold* and the date and time on them had reset to 00:00 00:00:0000. Until Dumbledore's face had been seen in the paper holding a swaddled baby in an old graveyard.

Hermione had investigated the graveyard herself, later. She found the faintest echo of a ritual that didn't work.

(Harry sees her there. His hand slips right through her. His voice is silent in her ears. His magic causes the faintest of ripples in her detection spells like the aftermath of a pebble falling into an ocean. She does not notice. Harry's tears go unseen.)

The Associate goes to ground. They keep their heads down. They wait. They weather the inquisitions and arrests. They stand strong and hold formation and wait for their leader to return.

Harry's not dead.

They all *know* that. He had died once and came back.

He will return once more.

They just have to wait.

He *will* come back. It may take a month. A year.

A decade?

They wait.

tether

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"No," Flora Carrow says in such a horrified voice that her twin looks up from halfway across the room. "But what about shrinking charms? How do they accommodate mass?" Her voice turns into a wail at the end.

Nott stares at his parchment blankly. Rosier also looks stumped. Tom pauses half-way out of the Common Room, pulling on a winter robe as he prepares to do his evening prefect round.

"Your friends are adorable," Harry says to Tom, drifting into view between breaths like the pulse of his heart, ever present. Like an autonomic process —the flow of his blood, the rise of his chest — Harry is a steady beat thrumming next to him.

"Shut up," Tom mutters, reaching for his wand to cast a muffling charm. He wishes Harry had taught him this spell sooner. He'd caught Avery giving him funny looks the other week when Harry had spent the duration of Tom's Defence class mocking their new teacher.

"And how do featherlight charms work?" Flora appears to be struggling. "Tom, are you busy? Can you help? How do enlargement charms work?"

"Magic," Tom says to her. She gives him a dirty glare. "I'm going on patrol," he says, shrugging on his cloak, "Ask Rosier or Black." The wall shimmers from an archway and back to an innocuous stretch of wall as he steps out of the common room into the dungeon corridor, the muffling spell blanketing him in warmth. "Where have you been?" he asks Harry, taking half a moment to check nobody's watching. Just because his words are indistinct and inaudible doesn't mean they won't see him talking to the empty corridor.

"Around," Harry says, frustratingly vague, "How was your date?" There's an odd overlay to his tone as he slips into pace with Tom. He's older today, ageing like a phoenix on a twisted burn cycle.

"Date?" Tom's mind goes blank. It takes him a solid twenty seconds before he remembers the mind-numbing afternoon that was his seduction attempt to get access to Bellatrix Black's family library and

the texts he had needed to look into *summoning* . Arcturus was growing wary of him (“Regulus isn't a total idiot then. He taught his son *some* sense,” Harry had scoffed at realising this) and Lucretia was an off-shoot of the family and did not have the same access. “Barely,” he sneers. “It was inane. And irritating.”

“She's following you like a lost puppy,” the wraith notes, still sounding a little strange.

“It will wear off,” Tom says, dismissively. “I don’t have time for idle pandering. What is the appeal of romance anyway when there isn’t a political advantage involved?”

“Oh I don’t know. Finding someone to care for? A partner, an *equal* … someone to be there for support.”

Tom twists to face Harry, "Like *Bellatrix* ?" he sneers.

"Do you not like girls, Tom? Is that it?"

“I don't like people,” the teenager says, with such bluntness that it's almost painfully obvious about how he feels about it, “I barely tolerate Avery.” Let alone the rest of his year mates who now appear to seek him out at most inopportune times. It makes speaking to Harry inconvenient, when there's someone else around Tom oblivious to the presence of the wraith.

Harry snorts, ungainly in his humour, “Just Avery?” He asks, “What about the rest of your little gang — Carrow, Nott, Rosier, Black—”

“They're there,” Tom’s tone is dry.

“And me?” Green eyes sparkle. A teasing edge to his tone as Harry leans forwards.

A head tilt. “You're *you* ,” Tom says.

A quirk of his lips. Harry moves, the wraith’s whole form blurring and re-focusing right in front of Tom. He's Tom's height. Or maybe Tom's finally grown tall enough he is Harry's height. There’s a strange gleam illuminated in his gaze as he stands before Tom and it takes Tom a moment to identify the emotion woven under Harry’s paper-thin skin.

Satisfaction .

"So there’s nobody?" Harry asks, reaching forwards to trail static along

Tom's cheek. Tom bats the wraith's hand away. His arm goes numb as it passes through the shadow that doesn't exist. "That's a lonely existence, Tom Riddle. To rule from your gilded throne, all by yourself."

"I'll have you, won't I?" Tom's chin takes on a stubborn lilt to it, and for the first time his brown eyes have an almost ruddy sheen to them as he starts walking again. "Won't I?"

He expects a challenge. He expects Harry to back down, to insist Tom helps him, frees him, releases him but instead the other just backs down, pace speeding up to catch up to Tom on the steps leading out of the dungeon. "I'll be with you," the promise is quiet, almost innocuous.

Tom turns out of the dungeon, passing towards the Great Hall on his usual patrol route, and Harry remains with him. There are moments he could trick himself to thinking there's another student with him. And then he'll turn down a corridor and Harry will be less a physical person and more an extra shadow flickering along the walls.

Being in Harry's presence is like looking at the night sky. He's looking up at the stars and wondering which ones are already dead. How many of those lights have already burned out, and yet the news has yet to reach them? Harry's actions, his fingerprints on this world — they were made so long ago, Tom's still waiting for the response. He's waiting for the light of the dying star to shine.

"So did your *political manoeuvring* of the youngest Black cousin pay off?" Harry asks, as they pass a window on the third floor. Moonlight spills through Harry's form, uncaring of the wraith's existence.

"The magic is crude," Tom says. The rituals in the books pilfered from the Black family library are raw, ancient things. Blood and flesh and bone. The power of three, the need for a threefold task—it doesn't seem feasible. But looking further, digging deeper into magics so blackened and ancient Tom got side-tracked for a week simply trying to *translate* —

Blood and bone and flesh. Threefold power. Soul and spirit and body.

He may be able to use it as the basis of the spell, Tom thinks, just in a different context. He *will* have to dive into necromancy. He will have to unravel the power from somewhere, and he'll have to get Harry's lieutenants on board. Either that or he'll have to literally chop off their arms at some point in the near future and he's seen Ron

Weasley's reflexes, he doesn't fancy his chances as a sixth year.

"It needs some ingredients I don't have. There aren't any in the classroom store cupboards either."

"Snape will have them."

"Our new Defence teacher?"

"He used to teach Potions —he's got a mastery, I believe. Terrible teacher, though."

"One would almost think you had a personal grudge."

Harry's laugh is bitter. "He used to teach potions before Slughorn," Harry drawls, "He was in love with my mother and was bullied by my father. He spent most of his career bullying me."

Tom levels with him a long look, trying to convey how little he cares about this information.

Harry's head tilts, "Dumbledore brought him here to protect *you* ," he shares. "Don't you realise? After Umbridge died, he became convinced I was behind it somehow. Me, or a follower of mine. He and his old crowd — they're all waiting with bated breath for my next move. They're all wondering how long before I go after the last Gaunt."

"My uncle—"

"Please, Tom. We both know your uncle is in Azkaban for the murder of a muggle family, surname *Riddle* ."

Irritation curls in Tom's gut. "You've got to stop stalking around Dumbledore's office "

"Why? I hear such *interesting* things. I think Dumbledore even suspected you for half a second before he realised the ring was missing and he went right back to suspecting me." Harry's nose wrinkles, "He used to like me. Back before I killed Malfoy. He was all endearing and grandfatherly. After… he stopped trying—always looked at me like I had let him down. Never did he apologise for letting *me* down."

A pause. A hitch in his voice. Tom looks at him, "The muggles?" He asks, peripherally aware of where Harry's issues with Dumbledore stem, "Your… *relatives* …"

Harry stills. He twists to look at Tom and the scar across his throat looks raw, like it's fresh, like Tom has cut it with his words. Bruises like flowers bloom from the broken skin. "My relatives hated magic," he says, stiffly, like he's never had to give voice to these facts before, "They hated me."

Tom remembers the certainty in which Harry had told him that Dumbledore would refuse to grant him summer residence at Hogwarts, had wondered what personal experience had lent anger to those words. He feels his own irritation at being denied the sanctity of Hogwarts during the summer. Like a cat spreading its claws he feels the anger sink into his chest. A burning fury *for* Harry. He does not recognise the feeling, does not understand why there is yet another thing here, stitching threads through them and tying them together. "Why not rid yourself of them?" he asks, "Why not purge the whole species? Why choose to spare them?"

"Oh, Tom," Harry's hands are gentle. His pity is not cloying. Instead it's more like a noose he's plaiting around Tom's throat. It makes Tom feel special. Smug. Harry's velvet croon and satine touch — he should not enjoy it so. "You hate muggles because of what they did to you. Because of where you came from. You hate muggleborns, too, for coming from that same ignorance. But does that not mean you should hate yourself? For coming from that which you hate."

Like ice splinters under fingernails, worming under his skin, "I'm better than them," Tom snarls, his throat half forming parseltongue with the words.

"You are," Harry's breath is a chill breeze along his spine, "We are." His is the corpse Tom will share a grave with.

Will this work, Tom doesn't ask, will he ever be able to touch Harry, to see him in full colour and not these sepia washouts? Will Harry ever exist to him beyond a shadow?

"You need me."

It is phrased as a statement, but it becomes a question when it leaves Tom's throat. He hates himself for this weakness. The truth of it is raw and bleeding. Harry *needs* him. Blood of his blood. The same bloodline —magic present in them both. So if the horcrux could be used to bring Tom back, surely something similar could be used to bring Harry back?

Harry's silver-sheened gaze is hungry as he looks at Tom, "Dumbledore

appears to agree with your assessment. Whatever went wrong when I tried to reach across the planes left us connected. Why, after all, should you be able to see me when countless others cannot? Is it just our blood, or did the magic bleed through and bind us, even with you still in the womb?"

Tom narrows his eyes. "Did you hear anything else when you were eavesdropping in Dumbledore's office?"

Harry shrugs, stepping forwards so he's a few paces ahead of Tom. "Dumbledore thinks there might be some other reason I went after the Gaunts. Divine purpose, or fate, or prophecy—"

Tom scoffs, "Was there?" his head tilts, "Do you believe in such things?"

"No," Harry says, "Trelawney enjoyed predicting my death on a daily basis in school. It got old after the first week. Do you believe in prophecy, Little Slytherin?"

"I have no use for prophecy," Tom spits. It is an intangible concept. A belief.

And Tom has not believed in a higher fate in a long, long time.

"We are above destiny. We create our own path."

"So if we get the spell… will you be my tether, Tom Riddle?" Harry's head tilts at the question.

A tether.

Much like the horcrux — a shard of a soul torn off to call like to like should the need arise —all Harry needs is a tether to this reality to bring him back.

Harry does not have any soul shards lying around. Instead he has pieces of his magic, belongings twisted through with silver and a wand with a phoenix core

Instead he has *Tom*.

"New Year's Eve," he says. "Seventeen years since you got stuck. Seventeen is my age of majority. There's power in that. We do it then."

"Your birthday," Harry observes.

“Yes.” Tom’s birth had heralded the disappearance of the Dark Lord. Let his entry to adulthood herald the rebirth. Tom *adores* the balance that falls into place with using that day. The arithmetic sequences are stunning. It's a shame Harry doesn't have the same appreciation for them as he does. “But first, I think we need to visit your lieutenants. And I need you with me to make sure they don’t try to kill me.”

*

“Any luck?” Ron peers over his wife’s shoulders, dropping a bowl of stew and dumplings on the edge of the table. He then has to pick it up as she sweeps a pile of papers to one side, nearly knocking the bowl flying.

Hermione looks flustered. She runs a hand through frazzled curls, “I think I’m close,” she says, “I need to visit the graveyard again to get some readings. It is theoretically possible to go to a different plane, but we don’t know which *one* . We don’t know where Harry is — we still have too many variables. But Luna and Terry have been a huge help. I think it’s possible to get to him.”

“Of course it is,” Ron says, with the unnerving certainty he always does, the solid belief that she is infallible. She picks up the dinner he’s cooked for her, the support he offers silently and without complaint. Age has mellowed him, she thinks. “Rosie’s staying at school for Christmas,” he says, “Wants to study for her OWLs… she does know she has five months still, right?”

“It will be quiet without her,” Hermione says. She’s silent for a moment, just eating. “Do you think we can do it?” she asks, “Do you think we’ll actually find him?”

“He’s not dead,” Ron says what they’ve been telling themselves for months now, “So he’s somewhere, which means we can get him back. Also… Kingsley’s been tailing me. The Order of the Phoenix is on edge. Susan says the auror team was investigating Umbridge’s death — something off about it. Maybe we need to get back into Hogwarts?”

Hermione opens her mouth to answer when there’s a knock at the door. She frowns, “I thought you said Rose was staying at school?”

“She is. I’m not expecting anyone. Are you?”

Hermione drops her bowl on the table. It’s a few steps to the hallway leading to her study. Another few down the short corridor to the front door, pushing aside their collection of coats that usually blocks the

latch. Ron hovers behind in the hallway, wand out. Their wards have not gone off to indicate someone with malicious intent, nor the ones to signify an auror or Ministry employee.

Hermione pulls the door open.

“Hi,” Tom Riddle stands on her doorway. He’s older than when she taught him, taller and yet still perfectly poised, still as slick and charming as he was two years ago. He blinks at her, dark eyes that look wine-stained under the streetlight, gaze flicking past her to where he must know Ron stands, and then to one side. And then he says the last thing she expects. “Mors vincet omnia.”

She stares at him, at those words falling from his mouth. Takes in the boy with those mahogany-brown eyes, neat parting of dark hair and an incessant curl over the forehead. “ *Excuse* me?” she asks.

“ *He* asked me to tell you that,” Riddle says, “So you’d know He sent me.”

He . The way Riddle emphasises the name leaves no question who he talks about. But even then Hermione stares, waiting for the other pin to drop.

“Can I come in, Professor? I have a favour to ask of you.”

“A favour,” she repeats, dryly, “And what *favour* can I offer the Boy-Who-Survived?” Her tone is too sharp to be casual, but he doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t even falter, “What could *I* possibly do for you?”

His smile sends chills down her spine. “It’s not a favour for me,” he says, “It’s a favour for Harry.”

*

The name hangs in the air. It’s a name that haunts their household, like a ghost, a third presence they never see. It has gone unvoiced in the world for years —he will always be Harry, of course, but towards the end he’d been less and less Harry and more and more Reaper. A jagged, torn creature with too many scars, driven by obsession.

(He’d been a marvel, don’t mistake it; a leader and messiah and hero all wrapped up in one person. He was an eclipse, coating everything in shadows as he stepped before the sun. Inevitable. Something to gaze at in awe and yet terrifying at the same time. Part of Hermione had always been terrified of the Reaper.)

(Ron never had been. He'd followed the Reaper into trouble as readily as he'd followed Harry, and they had never been different people for him. Maybe they should have been.)

Tom Riddle sits on their sofa looking far more comfortable than he should. There's a hint of a smirk, almost etched into that smug face of his. Ron wants to punch it off him. *Slytherin* , he thinks. Hermione is levelling a gaze at him so piercing it wouldn't surprise Ron if she was trying to use legilimency, even though she's never had a knack for the mind arts.

"Where did you hear that phrase?" Hermione asks. She had spent ten minutes casting detection charms —looking for an Order tail or a tracking spell. *Something* to give a hint at what the Boy-Who-Survived is doing sitting in front of them.

If anything his grin gets wider, "Harry told me what to say," he says with his crisp, enunciated accent.

Ron draws his wand. The boy's smugness reminds him of Malfoy, and yet his casual confidence *screams* Harry. The dissonance makes him uncomfortable. "This is familiar," he says, wand pointed at the boy, "Didn't think I'd get a chance to curse you again, but I will. Who told you that phrase?"

"Harry did," Riddle spits. And then before Ron can curse Riddle twists to the side, gaze directed at neither Ron or Hermione, "I told you this was a terrible idea," he snaps at the air. A pause. " *They'll listen* ," his tone is mocking, "They're *not* listening, they're *Gryffindors,* it's all cast first and ask questions later."

Hermione's expression goes blank. Ron feels his stomach plummet through his ribs. He looks at the empty space Riddle is speaking to. Fury is swift to follow even as Riddle turns back to them.

"Harry says that if you want to see him again you'll put your wand down and listen to me," Riddle drawls.

"Harry says?" Ron jabs with his wand. The boy doesn't flinch.

"Yes," he says, dryly, jerking his head in the direction he'd been speaking, "He's standing right there. And only I can see him."

*

Hermione stares at the boy. Pale skin, dark hair and dark eyes. He's

taller than when she last saw him, and there's an almost arrogant tilt to his chin that is not just bluster and misplaced confidence.

It's *power.*

Harry had looked like that once, that easy gait and quietly *gleaming* eyes. The stalk of a predator knowing they were the top of the food chain.

“You're expecting me to believe,” Ron spits next to her, “That you can see the Dark Lord. And that he's been trapped as a ghost that only you can see for the past decade.”

“Almost seventeen years,” Riddle hums, still so damnably smug, “And he's not a ghost. He's more like a wraith trapped in the ethereal plane.”

“Oh, and I suppose you've been chosen, you're *special* —” Ron is clearly not buying a word, “He's told you he'll bring you power and glory—” he stops. Riddle is laughing at them.

“For a Dark Lord,” he says with a shark's grin, “Power and glory don't really interest Harry. He's too much of a do-gooder for that. No, he wants to *help* people.” An eye roll. Fond, exasperated tone, “So. His idea for a new world backfired. Trapped him in a different plane. But I think I've got an idea to get him out. I just need your help.”

A beat. Hermione and Ron stare at him.

Riddle twitches, and his gaze flickers to one side, “Harry says he needs your equations,” he directs at Hermione, “The ones from his mother's notes. We've got a base ritual but we need to direct the magic across planes, somehow. I don't have that sort of theory available at Hogwarts.”

“Harry says,” Ron repeats, sharply, “You know who he is.”

“And he's *here?”* Hermione's gaze flickers to where Riddle keeps looking, “Now?”

“If you want proof, you can ask,” Riddle says. He pauses, waiting a heartbeat too long. Hermione is loathe to break the silence, unnatural as it is, Riddle’s attention fixed on something beyond them. Riddle speaks again, but not directed at them, “I'm not going to use legilimency, I'd have hoped your lieutenants had better shields than that.” Another pause, “Trusting,” a comment, a response to something

they cannot perceive. Riddle's gaze moves back to them, "Ask your questions."

"What—" she squints at the air near their sideboard, wondering if she stares hard enough she'll see their best friend with those green eyes and that messy hair grinning back at them. "What's my patronus?"

"People know that, Hermione," Ron says. If glares could kill, Riddle would be nine months buried and grave flowers already rotting.

"Otter," Riddle says anyway, almost contrite, "And you have a terrier. You're right, a better question is needed."

"How did we first meet?" Hermione says.

"Neville was there, that's also not—"

"Weasley was trying to turn his pet rat a different colour. You were eating corned beef sandwiches. You wanted to see some magic. Weasley had dirt on his nose. Longbottom had lost a toad."

The details are there. But Ron's right, even that question is not enough. It is not something they have folded down into their souls, wrapped their lives around and held to their chests. It is not words carved into their pulsing, beating aorta and shoved into the great vessel so it might become that which they grow upon.

"What did Harry tell me after the Selwyn raid?" Ron asks finally.

Hermione's jaw clicks shut. *She* doesn't know the answer to this question.

She never likes not knowing.

A pause while Riddle stares at thin air. "Second what?" He asks for clarification. Nothing must come, because he turns back to Ron, irritated, tone flat. "He says the first time was easiest. It only really hit afterwards. The second time was harder. Then it's all just repetition."

Silence.

Ron's jaw is working but he's not saying anything. His blue eyes are slightly glazed. "He's really here?" he says, quietly.

Riddle just nods.

Hermione doesn't push further. This is her proof in Ron's reddened

gaze as he blinks back tears and in the silence between breaths where Harry lingers.

“I just need your notes. The ones in his mother’s notebook,” Riddle appears to be growing impatient, “I can only slip my minders for so long.”

“They’re outdated,” Hermione says, absently. “I’ve improved upon the ritual but it’s still lacking power and direction—”

“We can handle that,” Riddle is dismissive.

Ron stumbles up from where he had ended up perched on the table. He’s tall and imposing but Riddle does not look cowed. His gaze is assessing —he has seen Ron with threats and knives in his hands. This time the boy is not bound and wandless.

“Wait,” Ron says to Hermione, “We’re actually going to just help him? Hermione… even if he can see Harry… we don’t know if he’s helping us or Dumbledore. This inbred spawn’s part of the reason Harry is gone in the first place. Why would he want Harry back?”

It’s a valid concern. Riddle looks unbothered, merely bored with their bickering. His gaze keeps periodically sliding to the side. Hermione looks at the dark eyes and finds herself looking for a reflection of her friend in the red-tinted gaze. Nothing. She is taking this on faith. A desperate hope that the sign she has been searching for all these years has finally come in the form of this boy, sitting before her.

“You don’t even question the fact he’s alive,” Riddle notes, “Only where he is. Did you *lose* him, Professor?”

“Not exactly your Professor anymore,” Hermione says. “You don’t want assistance with this ritual? When are you doing it? Where? Surely more help is better?”

“You’re a confounding factor,” Riddle says. “The portal wasn’t stable the first time he tried it—it’s not going to be more stable the second time. Do you *want* to end up trapped in a different plane of existence?”

Hermione’s brain whirls. Equations bounce around in her head—probabilities and hypotheses—she knows the boy is right.

“You’re the tether,” she realises.

Riddle looks inordinately pleased at her conclusion, “Yes,” he says, “Now you get it.”

Ron’s got a tick of irritation in his jaw. He’s standing, shoulders a tense line, but he makes no protest. Hermione knows he’s feeling the same thing she is—a spark of hope she had forgotten still lived, yet extinguished, that Harry may yet be alive. She reaches out, fingers finding her husband’s wrist and holding on. Slowly, she sees his hackles settle.

The outcome is set. This is happening. Riddle has given his proof. He has played his cards. It’s their turn to respond.

“I’ll give you what you need,” Hermione says, turning back to Riddle. Believing in Harry had never been a guarantee anyway. He had always been a faith, a religion to follow. Sometimes, these things require a leap.

“Are you sure?” is all Ron asks, once she’s handed over her notes and the information Riddle had requested. The sixteen-year old’s eyes were too sharp. Too assessing. She’d come back to him talking quietly to the empty spot in the room. She thinks about the boy she’d taught two years ago—about his uncanny remarks, all the things he shouldn’t have known about. About his skill in defence, the way he fought just like her friend.

And the way he speaks about Harry—

“Yes,” she says, “I’m sure.”

Riddle’s tone has a fevered edge to it, a severity to it that speaks of knowing Harry more intimately than all but those closest to him. The look on his face is… familiar? Fond?

Possessive?

Hermione had thought Harry was just mentoring this boy. Adapting him, moulding him into a trusted lieutenant.

But Tom Riddle doesn’t speak as someone who is a follower, as someone who sees Harry as a mentor or teacher. His expression is a black and white photograph, still and hard to read, but between shutter frames Hermione sees it. Not devotion, not terror or hatred either.This is not Dumbledore’s little martyr—

No, Hermione sees fire. A pure unfettered wildfire that blazes just as

bright as Harry once did. She sees *Harry,* echoed between facets of Tom Riddle. A mirrored reflection of the other; almost like seeing Harry standing right there next to him.

She feels a frisson of fear. "Oh, Harry," she breathes, wondering if he can hear her from where he's pressed between the folds of the universe, "I hope you know what you're doing."

Chapter End Notes

Ongoing credit to easterndreamer for doing some much appreciated beta work <3

Oh also check out the stunning art KagariAsuha did for this fic, it's linked in related works and I'm still in awe of the skill, as well as the number of little hidden nods to the story.

rebirth

When Harry first proposed the idea to Hermione, he'd never envisioned the full scope and potential. A new world sounded *grand* . In theory.

There are stories of whole cities being displaced between worlds; lifted and shifted through space. Tales of new worlds untouched and just waiting to be explored. The sheer *lack* of knowing galls Hermione, but Harry had always found it exciting: the *potential* . What would wizards do when given the opportunity for a fresh start?

Hermione thinks they could split the magical world from the muggle —fold the magical towns and cities away into their own pocket of space and allow people to keep their homes and businesses—to split the worlds like they had never been combined.

At some point they went beyond predictions and the known and tumbled off the deep end into the hypothetical. And then the Gaunt ring tripped Harry straight through the hypotheticals right into this misty ethereal *cage* .

Now he uses the same ring that had thrown him into ethereality to summon him back.

Tom returns to Hogwarts with the notes and information they need. He slips back into empty halls devoid of students. It's not unusual to return partway through the holidays.Some purebloods favour trips for their Yuletide celebrations, and Tom's little excursion to Ron and Hermione's goes unnoticed. The Slytherin spends several days in the library figuring out the runes that best balance the ritual he's already found. They already know what they're doing—this is just fine print at this point.

Tom's eyes are fever-bright with anticipation. They've always been a rich brown - a shade away from red-wine shone through with sunlight. But now the colour that bleeds into them in the flare of lamp lights is the colour of fresh-spilled blood.

It suits his neat dark hair and pale jawline. He's lost the rounded cheeks of childhood and he's still growing. He's going to be tall and striking—Harry has no doubt Merope Gaunt fell for a Muggle if he looked half as handsome as Tom does.

Harry cannot touch Tom. Not really. He has not touched anyone in nearly seventeen years. But if he presses fingers to Tom's jaw, if he lets his palms flatten over the other's hands and shoulders, he can almost convince himself he can feel something. A hint of magic, of warmth, a physicality he has grown unused to.

Harry isn't *real.* Pressed between planes, he does not hunger. He does not breathe and his heart does not beat. Yet in those moments he can almost feel his heart pounding in his chest.

Tom makes him feel alive.

The way Tom responds to him—bright eyes, sharp teeth—like a rangy lion with no pride. Both alone—the snake in the grass and the lone lion—they make each other their whole world.

"You're thinking too hard," Tom says. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," Harry says. "Uncomfortable?"

Tom's gaze is heavy. His poppy-tinged eyes rove over Harry with a hunger that makes his skin prickle. He's *so close* , Harry thinks. *So close now , after seventeen years.*

"Your initial idea was stunning," Tom says, "With a bit more time, I think you and Granger could have done it. Torn open a portal. I don't think it would have led to anywhere other than where you are, though."

"You don't believe other worlds exist?" Harry asks.

"I only believe in what I can see," Tom says, drolly, dipping his quill in the ink and scrawling out another rune. "The muggles at the orphanage used to take us to church. They used to talk about god and the devil and Jesus. Used to pray to the father, the son, the holy spirit… but if they existed then I never saw any proof. But magic? Magic exists: what point does religion serve in the face of true power?"

Harry traces an open drawing of a rune. Sowilo. It's the same lightning bolt that's shattered across Harry's brow. "There are things not even magic can explain. Life and death and what happens after. The worlds that exist beyond our own. The furthest corners of space and time…"

Tom looks up, meeting Harry's gaze, "Why should I worry about life

and death?" he shrugs, lips quirking. Not quite a smile. A confident *knowing* , the assurance in his own immortality, "Why should I pray to a religion that would consider my existence a sin? Sins are just more arbitrary rules someone has created. And I think we're both beyond rules."

"You don't believe in a God, Tom?"

The Slytherin looks at him, "I believe in you," he says, pointedly. He reaches for the quill and his movement stutters. His gaze slides past Harry to someone else. Someone standing behind him.

"Ah, Tom," the grandfatherly tone breaks the silence of the library. "I thought I might find you here."

Harry turns, deliberately blocking Tom's view of Albus Dumbledore. Then he's stepping away, circling like a stalking wolf around the table to where Tom sits. The headteacher's gaze skims the notes and books. Tom's hand curls protectively over a notebook filled with Harry's handwriting.

"Were you talking to someone?" Dumbledore looks around, spying only Tom and his books.

"Headmaster," Tom greets, politely. "No, just talking to myself. Can I help you?"

Dumbledore steps forwards, hand curling over the back of a chair, "I —ah… I'm sorry to have to track you down like this. I wanted to check on you."

Harry wants to bristle like an irritated cat, hackles raised, fangs and claws out. *Now* the old man cares? After all this time, all the children before… *now* he comes to check on the wizarding world's hero?

"Check on me?" Tom's head tilts, an edge to his voice. "For what reason?"

"I had a report from the Ministry," Dumbledore says, "It's about your uncle."

Harry watches the tick of Tom's pulse. The slight clench of his jaw. Tom is good, but he's not perfect. Not yet. The slight tells are there.

"The outcome of Morfin Gaunt's trial?" Tom asks, not even pretending to be ignorant to the events of the summer. "It was this week, wasn't

it?"

Dumbledore raises an eyebrow in surprise. "I wasn't aware you knew of his arrest," he says, mildly.

"He killed a muggle family, didn't he? The *Riddles* ," Tom drawls, setting the quill down and capping the ink. The black stains his thumb as he does. He looks down at it, but makes no move to clean it off. "I thought it was worth looking into. When I got contacted as his next living kin."

His tone holds knives. Razor sharp and balanced perfectly, but wary. He's grown tired of Dumbledore's coddling, Harry thinks.

Dumbledore looks taken aback at the bite but he masks it with patient geniality, "I'm glad to see you are safe. Despite everything."

"Why would I not be?"

Harry laughs. Tom's fingers twitch, the only indication that he can hear Harry. Tom used to be a spitting kitten, a lion cub with blunted claws but now—

He is not a lion. He's got too much snake in him.

Dumbledore looks tired. He pulls the chair out and sits down. "The aurors found the symbol of the Reaper burnt into the ground under Professor Umbridge's body," he admits. Tom and Harry are both surprised at the admission. "The Ministry does not think it means anything, but I fear the Reaper may not be as dead as first thought."

Tom lets that information sink in as if he is hearing it for the first time. "You never thought he was dead," the Slytherin says eventually, "Even when I first met you… you said he was gone. Gone, but not dead. You always thought he was coming back."

Dumbledore sighs and he seems to age as the breath leaves him, "We never found a body," he admits, "And he was brilliant in his ambition. To vanish with no trace so thoroughly… No, I do not think he just left or gave up. I do not think he died in the ritual that killed your mother. I think he's hiding. Wounded. Injured. Waiting."

Tom closes a notebook and slides the book over a page of notes with Hermione's handwriting on. The movement is smooth. Casual. Dumbledore doesn't even blink. "Why do you think he's coming back now?" Tom asks. "Professor Umbridge could have been killed by a

follower. Hermione Granger-Weasley taught here for a whole year and I don't think I heard her mention the name 'Reaper' once."

"Ah, all valid points," Dumbledore says, "But *now* , Tom, now you're an adult."

"Tomorrow," Tom corrects, "The thirty-first."

"The death of the month," Dumbledore says, and there's something in the way he says that phrase that sounds like he's quoting someone, "The Reaper was the same."

"I thought his birthday was in July," Tom can't stop the slight frown, looking at Harry, unsure what Dumbledore's doing, sitting here with warnings and platitudes, "If you'll excuse me, Professor, it's getting late."

Indeed the sun has long set. The candle flames grow low. The wax drips down forming a pool on the table. Something in Harry stirs, a frenetic, restless energy, the mad desire to leap off the cliff for the thrill of it, damn the consequences.

They're *so close now* .

Yet Dumbledore lingers. His gaze roves over Tom, over the books scattered over the table. Over Tom's hand, still splayed over his notebook, ugly black stone ring on one finger. Tom's fingers twitch, but he doesn't try to hide it.

Dumbledore's expression tightens. He says nothing, examining the books that Tom has out. There is nothing damning. They had learnt their lesson after Madame Pince nearly found that one Dark Arts book bound in human skin. The volumes are all innocuous: a tale of a man who claimed to travel to the fey realm, a book about magical inventions still open on the page containing portkey construction details. Another one on world theories, with a piece of parchment bookmarking a page on creatures that exist in the non-being. "Interested in planar travel, Tom?" he asks.

"A side project," Tom says, dismissively, not even bothering to collect the books back. He feigns disinterest to draw the attention from them. They are drab and boring and not even worth the time to put back on the shelves. The magic of the library will scoop them up shortly anyway.

It works. Dumbledore's tone is light. Distracted. "Unusual reading

material," he comments, idly, but not threatening. He does not look at Tom with condemnation, the way he used to look at Harry. He does not judge the teenager and find him wanting.

Tom packs away his notes, caps his ink. He is slow and methodical: he arouses no suspicion. "Do you really think he's coming back?" he asks, as he turns to leave.

The headteacher looks up, "I do," he says, "I wish it were otherwise, but I believe so. And when he does return, we must be ready. And you must be safe."

A slight tilt of his head, the same curiosity that's currently plaguing Harry crossing Tom's features. How oddly insistent, Harry thinks, that Dumbledore will once more throw this child to the wolves. "I know how to defend myself," Tom sounds indignant: like the teenager he is, for a change.

"You should not have to," Dumbledore says, false promises like arsenic on his tongue, "Not if you help us. Not if you stay under the protection of those around you. Tell me, Tom… there were times when those I asked to keep an eye on you were unable to find you."

A pause.

"Is there anything you would like to tell me, Tom?" he appears to *see* Tom for the first time during the whole conversation.

Tom meets his gaze but for a moment, tone airy and polite, "No, Professor."

The voice of a child who does not have hoarded treasures locked in the cupboard. The tone of a boy who doesn't know how the rabbit got up in the rafters. The voice of a teenager who has never met the Reaper.

The voice of the adult who lies to Dumbledore's face and gets away with it.

Harry thinks of the Greek monsters, the chimaeras of snake and lion and he watches Tom gnash fangs, scaled skin and red eyes.

Tom is not their hero. Tom is Harry's tether back to reality.

Tom vanishes around the corner of the bookshelves, leaving Dumbledore alone. Harry stays with him, silent and ethereal, simply

watching. The old man still appears distracted, blue eyes flinty in the shadows of the library. He is no longer playing the kindly old grandfather welcoming the wizarding world's lost martyr back to the fold.

He looks tired. His wrinkles are valleys, furrowed in an aged landscape, worn down over the years by rivers of emotions. Harry can only fathom at the thoughts plaguing the man.

But then: a sharpening of that blue gaze. Harry's magic itches. Although he does not notice it, frost creeps along the table. And Dumbledore reaches towards the discarded library book with the dog-eared piece of parchment sticking out from where it had been acting as a bookmark.

Harry's magic *sparks* . Like a needle stabbing through the fabric of the world, his magic *flares.* Dumbledore draws his hand back with a hiss. He lifts his fingers, looking at them strangely, and then at the parchment. Harry's magic gives the air gravity and he tries to force himself to calm. To breathe and slow his pounding heart.

A wand of fine elder carved with the imprint of berries swirls through the air. The parchment slides free. The scrawling cursive had only just been visible, peeking from between the pages. It's barely legible—Harry had never cared for quills—but the inverted hallows symbol scrawled there is undeniable.

Dumbledore's gaze is a thousand leagues away, staring at the parchment of Harry's notes. He reads it—he has a teacher's knack for being able to read terrible handwriting. Harry does not need to read it to know what it says. It reveals enough by its mere existence. The Reaper's own handwriting, folded into a book on planar travel being read by Tom Riddle.

"Oh Tom," the man says, as understanding illuminates him, "What have you done? What are you *doing* ?"

Harry does not wait to see what the headmaster does next. He's already moving, the castle blurring and fog growing thick. His magic loosens and re-anchors him several corridors over. Another shift and he's latching onto that siren call of the bells ringing him home.

"We have to do it now," he says, stepping into visibility. Tom looks up, startled, red-brown eyes wide, "Dumbledore *knows* ."

*

The parchment crinkles in Albus' hands.

How did Tom get his hands on this? Who has he been talking to?

What is he planning?

The rudimentary spell construction scrawled before him speaks of madness. Of reaching for impossibilities. Harry had been a child once, before he was the monster. He had been a boy with wide green eyes and knobbly knees and too baggy clothes.

(Too thin, too wary, but Dumbledore had dismissed his worries.

He regrets this now.)

The spell has Latin as a base, spliced generously with Greek and French. There's a runic circle to balance it but even then it's unstable. It relies more on power and hope than any sort of academic rigorousness. It could well unravel, resulting in death or displacement.

Albus' mouth is dry and he looks at the scattered textbooks and he thinks of Tom, avoiding his gaze, and *I thought his birthday was in July,* the teenager said, even though he has never met Harry.

Tom Riddle should not, to Dumbledore's knowledge, know the Reaper's identity. Let alone his *birthday* .

But Albus finds Tom surrounded by books on summoning rituals and different planes of existence and portals. There's a tang of ozone in the air, like the heat before a lightning storm.

And Dumbledore *fears* .

No.

He must be mistaken. He cannot have missed this. Not right before his eyes. He cannot have been this blind.

He doesn't even realise he's on his feet and moving, wand in hand. He'd been so busy looking for dangers on the outside, waiting for the attack to come from an external threat, he'd never looked inwards.

The boy is going to break open the world. He is going to reach through a shattered tear and try to bring something back.

Or some *one* .

Dumbledore had been there to watch the Ministry *shatter* .

He will not let Hogwarts break the same way.

His pace picks up, until he is running with an energy and youth he did not know he still possessed.

No , Tom .

He can only pray he is not too late.

*

They find an empty chamber in the dungeons. A room with low ceilings and wide-arching support beams around the side—it may have been a potions room once. It is dry and the air is stale. The chalk flakes onto the large flagstones. The candles drip wax and the lights flicker shadows over the walls. Tom is meticulous in his actions. Everything he does is perfect, from the curl of the runes to the poultice he burns.

There is a pace to his actions, an urgency, but even then he takes the time to smooth perfection into the chalk circle and burning herbs.

It does not need to be perfect, Harry knows. At the end of the day magic does not follow the neat lines of the river bed—it will spill and overflow as it wishes—they only need to direct it. But he feels the curl of chalk like a lover's kiss, the gentle touch of a hand as Tom strikes the match, writes a letter to Harry in drops of blood, bone and curls of red and brown hair.

"Ready?" Tom straightens, hand still daubed in the ashes of herbs.

"Almost," Harry says, standing to one side, brushing over the protective shielding wards Tom's inscribed around the chamber. They buzz beneath his hand like a warm, live wire. He presses down, his blood vessels becoming part of the circuit, magic siphoning through a hundred invisible folds of the world to flare the runes Tom's inscribed brittle white with frost.

There. Now they won't be disturbed.

The energy drain causes the world around him to blur out to white and back in.

"Don't wear yourself out," Tom says, wary, "I can keep a couple of

basic wards powered."

"Not if you're the tether of the spell," Harry says, shrugging, "Just in case."

He steps towards the boy, "Okay then. Let's do this."

Tom has two wands in his hand, grip loose and lax. The Peverell Ring rests on his finger. Harry steps up in front of Tom, reaching for the wands but not touching. Never touching. Incorporeal for over a decade.

He's about to change that.

The spell they've crafted is biting words and bitter blood. It is the dark plummet as they lower you to your grave, the absconding of the soul through the darkness. The cold is teeth ripping into his flesh.

" *Sequere si vis,"* Tom says— no, *asks.* Wand resting on his palm like an offering, the binding ties around it flaring white as they burn. It is not a demand the way Harry had once twisted the ring into this spell. It is not an order—it is a request.

" *Sequere si vis. Sequere si potes.* "

Follow if you want.

Follow if you can.

A beat, then the feeling of fingers crawling up Harry's spine. It is not the spell. Harry twists, the wards shimmering, the sound of footsteps rising as somebody approaches. There is the shadow of a third party.

Tom notices—he's also tied to the runes of the wards. His chant falters.

"Tom?" Albus Dumbledore steps through the archway leading into the dungeon. His footsteps falter as he takes in the scene —Tom standing in the middle of a circle, candles and incense burning around him.

"Professor," Tom says.

Dumbledore's face twists and his steps falter. His gaze flickers around, looking for what nobody else has ever been able to see. He *knows.* "Tom," Dumbledore says again, "What are you doing?"

Tom's grip on his wand is no longer relaxed. His fingers tighten and

he steps away from Harry, starting to stalk towards the headmaster. “It’s a celebration,” the lies are smooth, polished marble, “For the end of the year—”

“Tom—” Harry says, reaching for the other. He’s not sure of his intention —to pull him up short, to keep him focussed. He *knows* he can’t but even though he’s spent nearly half his life trapped the instinct is still there.

His fingers snag Tom’s wrist. Hands meet flesh and Tom spins to him. “Harry?” he says, feeling Harry’s grip. Tom is a physical, solid connection and then he’s not —he’s incorporeal again.

“Tom,” Dumbledore hears the name, takes another step forwards and hits the ward. The barrier ripples blue as he touches it. Both Tom and Harry’s magic trembles. “Tom, whatever he promised you, whoever you’ve been speaking to—”

“Ignore him.” Harry is the only person Tom sees, the only person he *needs* to see at this moment. The ghost of his touch leaves goosebumps on Tom’s arm. “We’re so close now, love. Just a little further—”

The Slytherin steps into his personal space. He twirls yew and holly loosely between long fingers. His pupils are dilated. His fingers curl through loose air. Harry is his oxygen, breathing for him and Tom is Harry’s heart, a ringing bell to guide him. “ *Mors vincet omnia* ,” he quotes, “Want to beat death, Harry Potter?”

Harry’s magic swells. He’s peripherally aware of Dumbledore stepping back in alarm as the protective ward flares blue. The candles flicker. Incense hangs heavy in the air. The smell of ozone burns and frost creeps across the ground. Tom’s breath fogs in the air, ice crystallising on his lashes. The heat drains as magic rises.

Harry reaches out and takes Tom’s hand.

reality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is painful, being summoned.

Magic tears Harry to shreds and reconstitutes him into tiny pieces forming the whole. The magic of the spell reaches for Harry and he reaches back with Tom as his tether. Magic *eats* at Tom hungrily, like waves lapping at the cliff face knowing it will wear it down eventually. Tom stands against the winds, the red bleeding into the brown of his eyes as he weathers the storm.

Harry burns at the stake—magic pulls him back atom by atom, stitching him together in shreds of the whole. He feels like a monster made of different parts—some Frankenstein creation being born from Tom's pride and Ron's loyalty and Hermione's faith. The curls of hair and drops of blood twist smoke into frost into form.

(Somewhere, Dumbledore is trying to unpick the shield surrounding them. He is inconsequential. A fly buzzing in the corner of the room. Harry is too busy dying in increments to care.)

Tom's hand is warm. Blue veins spread thinly beneath skin and pulse thrumming beneath Harry's fingers..

Harry can *feel* the beating pulse at Tom's wrist.

Another wave of magic manifests in the sharp bite of static. With a snarled hiss that sounds like Parseltongue, Tom flinches back. Harry's grip loosens as Tom steps away and it leaves him reeling. He stumbles, thrown off balance, stepping heavily on the flagstones.

His body is leaden.

Harry didn't realise he wasn't used to having a body until he was suddenly, once again, at the mercy of flesh. There is an ache in his chest and he claws at his ribs for several moments before he realises he has to breathe. As a wraith he'd never been real. No gravity, no physicality. Autonomic responses stopped.

Now he reminds himself how to exist.

Breathe. Blink. Swallow.

It's like trying to remind yourself of your own name. An instinctual, personal core pillar of his being has been knocked out and it leaves him reeling.

Gravity is unforgiving. Heavy. Has he really been carrying this weight around all these years?

Harry breathes air and tastes lightning on his tongue. He blinks bright spots from behind closed eyelids. When he reaches forwards, his shadow clings to him. His throat vibrates and it takes a few moments for muscles to remember the movements and inflections. It takes moments more for his mouth to curl around the name.

"*Tom .*"

*

Albus Dumbledore arrives too late to stop it.

He finds Tom Riddle in a circle of candles and incense, runes daubed in blood and ash, a protective barrier separating Albus from him. The air is steeped in death and decay.

The Elder Wand sinks into the ward like butter and then gets stuck. Tom is turned away from him, speaking to the air. *"Harry,"* he says, *"Death always wins,"* he says, words not meant for Albus' ears, words not meant for anyone physically present. Albus is missing something and he can't put his fingers on what, even as Tom Riddle holds out two wands in a loose grip.

And then the world rips itself open.

The storm of magic buffets at him, making him stumble. It does not want him here. *Leave* , it seems to scream, clawing at his skin. He stands strong against the storm and sinks his wand into the blue barrier again, forcing cracks to appear in it. He can see it weakening. He will be through soon.

Not quickly enough.

Candlelight dances and frost creeps along the ground. Tom's face twists in pain and he flinches back, curling in on himself from the backlash.

The scene before Dumbledore feels unbalanced. Like it's missing a piece. He adjusts his grip on the Elder Wand, withdraws it and then stabs it back into the protective shield.

This time the cracks shatter.

In transparent glass shards that do not really exist, the magic of the ward dissipates. Dumbledore steps through the fading blue light, magic gathering on the end of his wand as he readies himself.

Tom stands to one side, eyes shielded, lines of his body tense. The circle of candles flicker around him, shadows dancing along the walls. One moves, a shape shifting. The figure no longer walks in Tom Riddle's footsteps as, in the moment of calm after the storm, Harry Potter steps forwards into existence.

Oh , Albus thinks, *that's what was missing.*

The scene balances. The scales settle. The Reaper is as he was seventeen years ago —twenty-three with messy hair and green eyes. He doesn't even look at Dumbledore, moving towards Tom Riddle; reaching out and cupping the boy's cheek like he's something precious. Harry draws the boy up so they're standing side by side, Tom's eyes opening to look at him with triumph.

Tom does not look alarmed. Tom's eyes have a sheen of their own to them, one of red blood and black rot, and he leans into the other. His mouth moves but his words are quiet and don't carry. His posture is casual; his gaze familiar, the person he's drawn from shadow and magic known to him.

Harry Potter lives once more.

(He'd been here the whole time.

Time to wake up.)

*

When the pain hit, Tom had curled into himself. His teeth had gritted together, grinding molars and developing an ache like a live wire buried in his jaw. Through worlds away he hears Harry crying out, an echo on the edge of his hearing. He sees Dumbledore give up with unravelling the ward and instead sink the tip of his wand against it, magic bleeding the air hazy.

Blood splatters on the ground and hisses the moment it hits. The air is warm. Tom feels like he's burning. He’s not sure when he closed his eyes and stepped away, nails curling into his palms. The absence of pain isn’t noticed at first, the memory of it still making him tremble.

Soothing hands touch him. They run down his arm, his shoulders. His muscles are so sore his joints feel like they've seized up. His throat is raw.

He opens his eyes.

Mercury green eyes meet his gaze. The hands on his wrist move to his jaw, softly. Harry’s touch is so tender that Tom feels he might fall apart, raw and brutalised just so that Harry can put him back together. Tom is aware of Harry, thrumming with vibrant warmth. He can almost *feel* the other stitched into the fabric of his flesh.

Tom was Harry's tether to come back. And even though there is no tether to the ethereality that Harry had been a part of before, something still lies strung out between them, rooted deeper than any grave.

“Did it work?” Tom tries to brush hair from his eyes but Harry’s there, in the way, physical and their limbs bump awkwardly, an intrusion they are unfamiliar with as the Dark Lord presses searching, curious fingers against exposed skin.

“Tom,” Harry says Tom’s name like a prayer.

Tom’s breathing too fast. His pulse races. He stares at Harry: dark hair, green eyes, a defined edge to his form that hadn’t been there before. "You're real," he says. "It worked?"

"Of course it worked, Tom," Harry leans forwards, resting his forehead against Tom’s. Solid. *Present* in a way he never has been before. No longer a peripheral thought, always there; Harry is a dream made reality.

Tom enjoys the praise, the awe —he basks in the worship he can see in the eyes of the Dark Lord he just dragged back into this reality. He's therefore furious when Harry whirls away, pushing Tom behind him as Dumbledore finally crashes through the wards.

Dumbledore comes to a sharp halt. He looks at Harry and then Tom, close behind. “You were here,” he breathes in a final, dawning realisation, "The whole time."

*(Time to wake **up** .)*

"Albus," Harry's grin is sharp. "You're looking old, old man."

"*Harry* ," Dumbledore makes a noise that sounds like someone has punched him in the gut, "You're alive. You—" his gaze pans to Tom, "What did you *do* , Harry?"

"You make it sound like I was dead," Harry takes a step back until he's a warm impression pressed against Tom, as if shielding him from Dumbledore's gaze, "I think we both knew I was never dead, Albus."

"You were gone. A lot changes in seventeen years, Harry. The war is over. Your followers are gone. Scattered. None of them even looked for you —you had to resort to a teenage boy to resurrect you."

"*A lot changes* ?" Harry's laugh is a splintered thing, "Nothing's changed, Albus. You're still raising children to fight your wars for you. I thought you'd have learned better."

"Tom—"

"No, you *don't get to speak to Tom* ," Harry snaps, "You don't stand there and act all righteous. For the greater good, *god* , still the same *lies* . And they *let* you. The Ministry grovels at your feet and you pretend you don't enjoy it. You pretend you don't want the power they offer you up on a silver platter.You have the power to change things and you do *nothing* , while children crawl through the trenches in your name."

Dumbledore's gaze darts to Tom and Tom meets it. Holds his chin high and he's still learning how to shield his thoughts, but in this moment he lets the door open to the headmaster just a crack—

(*That's my wand* , says a boy with green eyes and the devil's grin and he lunges forwards, there but not there, and Albus falls out of Tom's mind with the slightest of stumbles.)

Harry no longer exists in shadows and reflections around him. He is real and physical and Albus Dumbledore flinches away from the truth, horror in his gaze as he takes in Harry and Tom. "You weren't dead," Dumbledore says, gaze flicking back to Harry, "You were trapped. A breath away—"

"People whisper a lot of secrets in empty rooms," Harry grins. Tom feels Harry's hand trailing over his wrist, pressing down quick,

reassuring, and then reach for where Tom's still got two wands curled tightly in his grip.

The wands hum in their grip. Deft fingers reach for one and Tom doesn't do anything—he lets Harry take it. They burn phoenix fire hot in his grasp. The other man's fingertips linger over Tom's pulse, the press of a promise, and then he's being pushed backwards.

He stumbles away heavily, breath knocked out of him and by the time he's regained his balance and slipped into a duelling stance, Harry is already stalking towards Dumbledore with murder in his eyes.

*

The wards shatter and Harry's there. Hackles raised, standing between Tom and Albus, without a moment's hesitation, he is as fierce and wild as the last time Albus saw him, seventeen years ago.

Except the baby Albus had found unborn in a cold, midwinter graveyard has grown. And that boy stands behind the Dark Lord, brown eyes ringed red, watching Harry with hunger and *knowing* . *Drinking* in the sight of the candlelight throwing shadows off the man who stands and lives and breaths for the first time in years.

Harry had never been gone. He'd been here: a wraith none could see. Trapped: a wolf clawing at the door.

Albus has no doubt he'd have gotten in eventually, but the boy—

(*Let me in* , cries the wolf, except no *, wrong fairy tale,* because Tom had always been the scrounging, rib-visible wolf while the raven circles overhead, waiting for carrion to pick at.)

The boy let the wolf in. The boy was always the wolf.

Dumbledore had just finally opened his eyes.

Their wands hum as Harry steals one from Tom's fingers and steps forwards. Harry spins it in an elegant twirl between his fingers in the borrowed habit of the boy behind him.

Albus isn't sure who casts first. There's a spell forming on Harry's wand, light beginning to gather, but the Elder Wand in Albus' grasp is already buzzing, already anticipating the danger. For a moment the pressure in the air grows, his ears pop.

(It's like the flash of lightning before the storm. There's that moment of hesitation and doubt that you saw anything flash across your vision at all.

Then the thunder cracks the sky.)

Their spells hit. Fire spreads from Harry's wand, blazing blue-white at the edges. Albus has water and sand to quench it but there is a life to Harry's flames. A phoenix spreading its wings.

('Fawkes' wand sold,' Olivander wrote to Albus nearly thirty years ago. 'The yew one. To Harry Potter.'

Six months ago Albus had received another missive. 'Tom Riddle finally purchased a holly and phoenix feather wand.')

The wand in Harry's hand is the holly. The yew remains in Tom's fingers as the boy just watches. The Dark Lord is an imposition between them. Tom makes no effort to move, not while Harry is there, impenetrable—a wall of defensive magic woven together in a brilliant tapestry. There's an edge to his magic, a *bite* , that was not there the last time they duelled. His magic has *teeth* .

The air smells like smoke and ozone and permafrost. Albus remembers the scent lingering in corridors and the shadows of his office. He thinks about how Tom Riddle's eyes had always slid past him to something unseen.

Some *one* .

Albus should have *realised* .

Now Harry exists—real and solid. His spellfire is blinding. Dumbledore counters, the Elder Wand *singing* in his hand. The air flashes with the full colour spectrum blinding black spots onto his vision. There isn't time to formulate the spells—it's raw magic. The Elder Wand shapes it into twisting stone and water to spear and stab at his opponent.

Harry is *bitter* . It bleeds into his magic which lashes out like a whip, thirsting for blood. Time and isolation has only made the Dark Lord more vicious. He used to hesitate. His magic used to hit softer, used to be easily knocked aside, countered with a spell or two. Now he doesn't leave those opportunities. His imprisonment has cut away his weaknesses.

Except—

Albus' gaze slides past Harry to where Tom lingers behind him.

A weakness.

Harry covers for it, his holly wand swinging around with a swirling black gravitational well clinging to it. Dumbledore remembers this spell—a favourite of Harry's, one he's never figured out how to counter—so he knocks it aside instead. It impacts against the stone floor and sends rock shards flying. Harry darts lightning-quick out of the way but Albus doesn't. A sliver of stone hits Albus's arm. His fingers spasm.

The Elder Wand *burns.* Albus is grateful for Hogwarts' wards—he remembers how Harry used to apparate around the battlefield—the Dark Lord had always favoured speed and power in duelling. It made him unpredictable. Lethal. Now his fondness for the sixth-year Slytherin ties him to one spot, chains him to shouldering the brute force of the Elder Wand's power. Albus' spells hit a shield and force Harry back half a foot, his shoes skidding on stone.

"I don't want to do this," Albus says, throwing out another curse. Harry stumbles. "You don't have to tear it down."

Harry backs up another step. He seems to find his resolve from somewhere, cracks in his shield *burning* with frost. "Someone has to," he says. "And if it has to be me, then at least it's not them."

He thinks he's doing the right thing.

It's the most dangerous kind of conviction.

"You asked for the Defence job once. We could work together—"

"To do *what* ? Hide at Hogwarts while the purebloods turn a blind eye on the world? Ignore the rising threat the statute faces with every new muggleborn student? I'm not you, Albus. I'm not going to ignore the threat until it's too late."

Dumbledore's spells falter but only because his attention has flickered to Tom. The boy holds his wand loosely, hovering at the edge of the spellfire, gaze fixed on where Harry stands, an imposing force between them. "Do you know what you have brought back, Tom?"

"Yes," the boy with red-rimmed eyes says. An ambition that

Dumbledore is all too familiar with sits unchecked in his bones, "*Revolution* ."

Dumbledore's next spell *shatters* the air. The pair dive to the side to avoid the splintering spellfire—Tom to one side and Harry to the other. Hogwarts trembles as they fight at her heart, but the old stones stand strong.

Albus reaches out for her support, to lean on the wards and magic that has made and claimed him as headmaster.

He hits cold stone and frost: a raised drawbridge and castle walls barred to him. His breath catches in his throat.

Hogwarts is sentient in the way that a forest is sentient. She does not talk, she does not *think* or *feel* or have *bias* .

But her flagstones are iced with frost, splintered through with pieces of the Dark Lord. How terrible, Dumbledore thinks, to have shards of someone's magic dug in like icepicks. He cannot grasp the magic of the castle through the wall of impenetrable glaciers.

There is no bias. She doesn't care for Harry over Dumbledore. She merely breathes and when she does, so does Harry.

Harry's head tilts at him, mercury-green eyes almost amused. "You thought me dead. And I came close. But I hung on. I clung to Hogwarts. To the magic here. I'm as entrenched in this place as you are."

"And Tom brought you back," Albus breathes, "Because of the ritual connection. The *blood* connection." He has seen the ring on Tom's fingers. He understands, now, the magic woven around the pair—can see the red tether stitched between them. Harry's weakness exposed, his rib cage opened up revealing the bloodied beating heart beneath.

And so the next spell he throws is not aimed at Harry. It's aimed at Tom.

*

Harry feels himself losing. Bit by bit, Dumbledore presses forward. The advantage of skill and experience is still his and Harry is grounded. He used to be a sight on the battlefield—dancing around in a flash of a silver mask and black robes —but he is out of practice and has spent seventeen years in ethereality. Hogwarts' wards blanket him

in comforting magic and they tie him down—he cannot throw himself into his usual reckless tactic of apparating around the chamber. He cannot leave Tom exposed.

He is dragged down by gravity and a body he has not had to use for nearly two decades. He's out of breath, sweating and blood trickling from where a curse just nicked him. Dumbledore senses this weakness, presses forwards and forces him and Tom apart with a splintering of the air. Harry ducks away from air that had turned sword-sharp in its lethality. He retaliates with frost and ice and fire, each coming to him more naturally than breathing, at the moment.

Dumbledore's next flurry of hexes is thrown towards Tom.

Fury ignites in Harry's veins.

Dumbledore would hurt *Tom* .

Wrong move.

His wand grows as incensed as he does, singing through the air. *How dare Dumbledore try to hurt Tom.*

His magic takes on that bitter-sweet taste of graveyard rot that used to bleed between worlds and he launches himself back into the fight with renewed vigour.

*

Harry is *stunning* , Tom thinks. It will take Tom *years* to reach this level: years and falling through a portal to a world of shadows and ethereality. This is not the classroom flinging of one spell then another —this is the calligraphy of one letter to another forming a seamless sentence of spells that fly between the duelists.

Some of Dumbledore's spells swing wide. They're aimed at *him* , Tom realises. He doesn't get around to deflecting them because Harry's already there. Dumbledore's spells combine into a relentless chain, designed to overwhelm. His casting is fast and vicious. Harry doesn't attack—he's too busy countering—Dumbledore gives him no respite.

Another sharp combo. Something bright, some fire, more spells, the vicious purple of a cutting curse spins towards Harry's throat, right towards the scar that Dumbledore had already torn open once.

For a moment Tom thinks it will land. That Harry will stumble into it,

that gravity will betray him. But then the holly wand flicks out, Harry spins and sidesteps and the spell passes harmlessly. But Harry is flagging. A decade and a half of non-existence *wears* . His magic is a storm but it's undirected; too wild, too untamed after all these years.

"Tom," Dumbledore gives up speaking to Harry, "Tom, he will tear our world apart. A civil war between magicals—is that what you want?"

Harry stumbles, using Dumbledore's distraction to catch his breath. He is not used to gravity and corporeality. He looks tired but still full of fire, full of life. Sharp, silvery scars flutter like butterfly kisses along his jaw and throat as he breathes heavily. His brilliant green eyes reflect the fire that burns around them.

Once, Harry walked away from an encounter with Dumbledore with a nasty scar across his throat.

This time will be different.

This time he has Tom.

When Dumbledore turns back to the Dark Lord, Tom *moves* . He is not defenceless. The yew in his hand has worked for him since he was eleven but ever since the summer, ever since he returned with yew berries staining the iris of his eyes, it's worked for him on a new, instinctual frequency.

Harry's shield spell shatters from the force Dumbledore throws into his spells. The follow up doesn't hit either, Tom conjuring up a dome of heavy brass that twists into liquid metal and explodes outwards.

Wide green eyes look at him, a spark of curiosity and *hunger* there. Tom had dug this spell out of the Nott family library and even Dumbledore misses a beat in trying to deal with the molten metal.

Then the moment is gone and they're fighting together. Harry has been teaching Tom for years—it's like breathing to fall into step beside him, matching him spell for spell. Dragged into the fight Tom finally reveals himself: shows the bite and the venom he has buried under a veneer of charm.

Facing two opponents Dumbledore falters. Harry takes the moment's respite, and Tom feels Harry's magic brush up against his—it still has the tang of frostbite but it *burns* . There's a heat to it that wasn't there before.

Dumbledore sends a spiralling cascade of stones and slate twisted into the form of a lion, jumping for Harry's throat. Tom's yew wand flashes out, a shredding shield reducing it to sand. With almost an afterthought he passes the spell over to Harry, the magic passing between them like blood in the same system. With a twist of holly, Harry turns the sand into glass.

Pressure and heat forces yellow grains into clear, glistening shards. Almost lazily Harry throws it forwards.

Glass shards hit flesh.

Dumbledore flinches. A hand drops to his rib cage.

Distracted by two opponents, he'd not expected the magic to pass between them, for the spell to come as a physical attack through his defences.

The glass shards found their mark. Dumbledore's spells falter. His casting stays strong but he's slower. His spells take a second longer to chain together.

And like a raven circling, Harry hones in on the dying prey.

Tom watches as Harry kills Dumbledore in stages. Harry strips the man of his defences and tears pieces of him away bit by bit. The glass digs into flesh, like shrapnel buried in his bloodstream. With every pump of the heart muscle they inch closer to the core of him.

Harry waits a moment longer, letting the glass dig that bit further in, like nails in a crucifix. Then he turns the solid glass back into molten liquid.

Wounds sear open and cauterise instantly. Glass rivulets like tributaries become a single river.

Tom is the one to summon the glass from Dumbledore's veins. The liquid glass pools like water, scales and sinew twisting into a snake. It's half-way to rearing up with glass fangs when Harry steals the spell back. The snake continues to exist, but next to it two other heads crystallise into existence. The monster it becomes is neither snake nor lion but some frankenstein amalgamation of both.

The chimaera is lion and goat headed and snake tailed. The sounds that are ripped from its throats are like the grating of sandpaper. Blood and burning red fire edge the shape a glistening ember-coal red

as it stalks towards Dumbledore.

The old man sinks to his knees, gaze fixed on the monster of snake and lion.

“I didn’t want this.” Harry sounds genuinely saddened as he looks at where Dumbledore sways, “If there was another outcome…”

And no. That won’t do. Tom’s there before he even realises it, “You don’t apologise to him,” he snarls. “I won’t let you. You’re not *his* .”

Green eyes widen. Silver bleeds around the edge of Harry’s pupil, an iridescent oil spill. Harry’s not looking at Dumbledore in that moment, gaze transfixed by Tom. Harry’s image blurs in Tom’s mind—eleven and sixteen and thirteen and all the different facets he has met of this man that stares back at him.

The Dark Lord turns away from Dumbledore in that moment as the blood-glistened glass chimaera leaps.

Neither of them look to see Dumbledore fall. Harry’s attention is fixed on Tom, his lips curling into that same self-confident grin he had first greeted Tom with.

“Why, Little Slytherin—” Harry reaches for him, fingers latching in Tom’s sleeve and dragging him closer, “Are you *jealous?”*

Tom’s fingers press to Harry’s jaw. There’s a possessive clawing to his grip; he knows he’ll leave marks when he lets go. He doesn’t know what to do with Harry now he’s here, now he is real—a living heart-beating human, no longer a wraith haunting his shadow.

“You agreed that we were in this together,” he says. He’s not jealous—what is there to be jealous of? A dead man, bleeding out onto the flagstones?

He has Harry. They’ve *won* .

“Oh, love,” Harry lets out a soft laugh, “I think we’re bound together by more than agreements and vows now. You brought me back. Can’t you feel it?”

And he can. Tom’s magic called to Harry and the Dark Lord stepped through worlds as the year died. There’s a warm curling *presence* in the back of his mind —some connection they have yet to parse out, to even begin to understand. It feels so natural when Harry closes the

last few inches between them to kiss him.

It’s iron and heat and Tom is breathing too fast. He tastes salt and torment on Harry’s lips.

Harry pulls back, letting the air from their lungs mingle until they’re one body, hearts thudding shared blood around two systems, magic an open conduit between them. "You did beautifully," Harry says. He’s physical and real beneath Tom’s fingers. “You were *stunning* .”

They’re going to change the world. Reshape it to their whims.

Harry’s warm, Tom can feel a pulse: mortal and fragile and like a bird's, hammering away, buried under fragile skin.

There's a moment he contemplates how easy it would be to snuff it out. He knows the words. But doing it to *Harry* —

He sees Harry for all that he is. Visionary. Leader. Dark Lord. Sarcastic and snide, dry humour and the thrumming adrenaline of a quidditch game racing towards victory.

He is seen right back in return. Harry treats Tom as a person, flaws and all laid out to bare, his ribs clawed open and exposed for the buzzards and crows to pick clean his bones. Beneath his gaze, Tom is reduced to mortality and he does not hate Harry for it.

(Harry loves freely and easily and it is impossible not to fall at least a little bit in love with him in return.)

"Tom," Harry presses closer and Tom allows it. He is not surprised when Harry kisses him again. Chapped lips press to his with pressure and warmth, curling touches, so gentle. Being wanted is something Tom is not used to, but he enjoys being the centre of the Dark Lord’s attention.

They’ve been bound together since he was born. It makes sense that they end up here, so entangled in each other.

Harry kisses with a Cheshire-cat grin. He’s got gravity and weight to him when Tom reaches for him. His magic is warm beneath his hands.

Harry's so warm.

Chapter End Notes

Slight delay in this chapter - I was on nights and hadn't yet had a

chance to edit this. Huge thanks to easterndreamer for ongoing beta work!

There's a short epilogue but otherwise, this mostly wraps this story up. Thank you so much for all the comments and supports <3

epilogue

Chapter Notes

FINISHED! XD

Thank you so much to everyone who read and commented for the endless support, and also easterndreamer for the beta work for the second half! Eternally grateful to all of you guys - you've been absolutely amazing and I had such a blast with this little role-reversal that ended up 50k longer than intended! What a ride!

I have a brewing plan for a timetravel tomarry, we'll see if they come to fruition, watch this space.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry runs his hand over stone walls.

Small flecks of dirt stud his palm. The stone is cold. Hogwarts holds its breath around him, a slumbering dragon grown cold in its hibernation. Her wings spread to blanket the castle in a white layer as ash falls from the sky; white on white. His breath steams in the air. He ascends the stairs of her spine, pausing by a cracked window. The air of the new year is filled with ice and snow. The death of the old one is still rotting on his tongue.

Nails catch and scrape solid sandstone. The jarring textures make him shiver. *Too much,* a part of him thinks.

There are tastes and smells on his tongue that he barely has the names for anymore. Something cold and sharp stings the back of his throat. His eyes are dry and gritty and he reminds himself to blink.

His limbs ache, the constant weight of gravity making him its slave. He stares out over the falling snow of his domain, breathing it in. Hogwarts slumbers on, students and staff blissfully unaware of the frost that has crept in while they slept. Like a winter, harsh, cold—the spring will be all the more welcome for it.

He walks the castle freely, as he always did. If the caretaker is patrolling or students are sneaking out he does not pass them. Tonight is for him.

Harry lingers on an upper floor. He likes heights—he always has, the

freedom, the hope of the stars and sky spread out endlessly above him. He had never felt as free as he did when he was under the open sky. From the grey clouds and barely visible—a ghost in the snow—an owl looms from the dark. She lands on the windowsill, black freckles and golden eyes as she clips her beak at his fingers.

“Hello girl,” he croons to Hedwig. His owl is reproachful, but there’s fondness there. Snowy owls live for a decade in the wild. They can live three times that in captivity and twice that again with magic bred into the hollow of their bones. He wonders if Ron and Hermione sent her out or if she took to the air the moment she sensed him on this plane of existence. “Let them know,” he says, passing a folded piece of parchment in an envelope to her.

A final clip at his fingers, drawing blood before she takes the letter. He doesn’t mind. The sting of red is one of many, endless proof of his physical presence in this world, and despite the pain he appreciates the reminder of life.

Hedwig launches herself back into the night like a wraith. A letter to Ron and Hermione.

It worked. Dumbledore is dead. Keep your head down. Speak soon.

He misses his best friends with every cell in his body. He will see them. Soon. They will talk and he will meet Rose and be able to hug his friends. There’s a cause. There is always the cause. But the Dark Lord has been dead for seventeen years. Harry Potter has been dead for longer.

Maybe it’s time to resurrect Harry Potter.

There's a painting on the wall. Harry remembers he used to think it was an empty field until sixth year, when stumbling down the corridor with blood on his hands he had seen the skeletal winged horses cantering through it.

A hand curls possessively at his hip. He stills, framed in the window - a silhouette against the snow and clouds of the Scottish highland. He feels warmth behind him, a contrast to the chill of the winter. A sharp chin settles on his shoulder and fingers turn his chin to meet a red gaze. His lips curl at the wordless demand in that grip, at the impatience written there. He stills. Allows Tom to come to him seeking. Demanding. Warm breath, even warmer lips. Lean muscles pressing a hot line against his body.

And to think he'd almost killed Tom. The thought is an itch under his skin, fate being carved into his bones as Tom nips at him with just the hint of teeth. He's all hard lines—none of that softness Harry is used to with previous partners. There's a cruelty flecked into Tom's bones that will take and take and *take* if he lets it.

"They'll find the body," Tom says. "What will you do then?"

They'd left Dumbledore where he fell, the floor scarred with a moth's eye carved in rivulets in blood. The aurors will investigate. People will whisper. And Harry will reach out and re-establish his connections.

But slowly. In the shadows.

"Dumbledore mentioned the Defence job," Harry says."You've got a year and a half left still. I can wait a year and a half for you to graduate."

He needs the time to rebuild his cause. To reach out, break some friends free from Azkaban, remind people of their loyalties. Many stayed on in the Ministry. The pieces are there—they could still do this.

He's distracted from his thoughts when Tom pushes him back. Harry slides onto the window ledge, sitting back and Tom follows him down. He's a flying weight pinning his limbs to the stone as they tangle together, Tom straddling him with too-long limbs and skin filled with bird-fragile bones touching. His kisses are hungry, *demanding* things. *Possessive* .

"I think you're right," Harry says, between kisses.

"Am I?" Tom hums against his neck, "About what?"

Harry turns into him, feeling Tom's pulse beneath the pads of his fingers. It's thrilling, it's a wonder, the way Tom swallows in alarm and surprise at having Harry right there, lifting his chin and kissing bruises against his throat, "I don't think we can escape by building a new world," Harry concedes, "I don't think the magic is stable enough. I don't think—"

He doesn't think he can face the possibility of nothingness again. Of that world of white mist and ethereality. Of reaching out and never touching. His fingers are still on Tom's neck, just feeling the pounding pulse there. Reassuring and reminding him that the world exists for him now.

Tom shifts back a little so he's no longer sitting on Harry, and instead sitting next to him, but still so close their knees touch and one leg is slung over Harry's. "So if escape isn't the answer," Tom's tone borders on mocking, but Harry allows it, "Are we to fight?"

Harry pulls back a little to look at him, "Bloodthirsty, vicious thing, aren't you?" he says, "Let's see if we can avoid a war first, shall we?"

Tom's smile is fang-filled and violent. "Call it a war or not. We're going to win."

Harry thinks he already has.

Chapter End Notes

(Even though Hermione had known the plan, had read the note from Hedwig in a messy scrawling cursive, had felt it in her bones, her magic the moment Harry came back, she still feels like she's seeing a ghost when he appears on her doorstep. She can't quite stop the sob that sits in the back of her throat.
Harry walks like someone not used to being present. He lurks in the shadows, stands just beyond her eyeline, constantly in her periphery. It is, somehow, despite his skulking, impossible to forget he is there. There is a presence to him - a blazing, silver-bright emanation of magic and aura that sinks tangible into the room.
He's solid and warm and she keeps looking at him as if convinced he will vanish if she does not. Ron hovers, overbearing and more physical than either her or Harry, constantly patting his shoulder.
"Don't ever do something stupid again," she says, sniffing and she's crying, she realises.
She thinks Harry is too, but his eyes have a sheen to them anyway, but maybe it's just the silver in the green.
"We're back," Ron says, his grin all teeth. "We are back, aren't we? Slytherin's heir recruited for the cause and all?"
"Tom's with me. Are you?" Harry still has edges of doubt, worn razor thin from those times where nobody stood up for that boy in the cupboard.
They put those doubts in a grave, as deep and dark as the one Albus Dumbledore now rests in.
"Always.")

Works inspired by this one

Fanart: Trenches by KagariAsuha

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